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INTERIM



*NOVELS BY R. C. HUTCHINSON*

THE FIRE AND THE WOOD

TESTAMENT

SHINING SCABBARD

ONE LIGHT BURNING

THE UNFORGOTTEN PRISONER

THE ANSWERING GLORY

THOU HAST A DEVIL



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ECONOMY STANDARD

# INTERIM

*By*

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## I

NOT that Orchilly was unique. Leave the macadam for a mile or two in any county and you will find a place which might be blood-related, so close it will seem in countenance and breeding. Neither should I pretend that Quindle was peculiar; he belonged to a type still commonplace, though perhaps obsolescent, among the middle classes of this island. But the hours I spent at Orchilly seem to me worth recalling. In these years you live with practically no constants in your experience. The place they give you to sleep in has hardly time to grow familiar. You meet a man, he becomes your closest friend, in a month you've forgotten what his name was. The human creature hungers for things that last, he must always be pasting fragments in some album. And because I found at Orchilly something more whole than mere sensation I shall put a glimpse of it on paper, now, before it has gone: the outlines with a note or two, the kind of thing a child draws for his letter home. In twenty years, if I am still about, the sketch will be something to glance at with the rest of one's sentimental junk: the pressed gentians, a shoulder strap with a hole through it, the concert programmes.

## 2

THE road forks three miles out from the town, the right-hand branch sweeps on towards Cernwith and begins the four-mile climb through Julian's Gap. The leftward branch is a thing you would hardly notice in daytime; in darkness and rain it was the one we took.

I knew we were wrong almost at once, by the feel of the road

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through the quad's tyres. But I did nothing, supposing vaguely the lane would lead us somewhere, and not caring much. We had lost all touch with the Troop since early evening, Exercise 'Yodel' had been going five days, and the rain (as well as I remembered) three-quarters of that time. I had not slept in the previous sixty hours, or fed in the last eighteen, so it did not seem to matter if the road bent east again to Cernwith or west towards the sea. Kemble, hugging the wheel like a drunken dancing partner, was all but asleep. Mechanically, he heaved her right and left as she floundered through the potholes, shoved her in second when the road started to climb. When I asked if he'd any idea where we'd got to, he said: 'You'll find it in amongst the fuming jack.'

Afterwards I knew the lane so well: it is hard to remember how much I was aware of then. The cottages called Randall's Gift I did see as our headlights dribbled over them, I knew we were rising steeply as the potholes grew worse. The stone pillars where the outer gate once stood I may or may not have seen, but I realized after a quarter-mile that the road had grown still narrower; and was fairly certain then, though I would not admit it, that the thing would peter out. The hedges rubbed against our sides, the quad was pitching like a collier in a gale. When the rear forewheel came up against a boulder, and the engine stalled and the whole dæmonic issue sank back to rest, I judged that our voyage was at an end. I bundled out, grazing myself on a wall some fool had put there, and mechanically cleaned the windscreen. (The electric wiper was of the temperamental sort, and loathed wet weather.) I advanced a few yards through the mud, sowing what feeble light my torch gave, returned and climbed in again. 'It may lead somewhere,' I said, 'just shove her on.'

Without seeming to wake he let her back a yard or two, whipped her on again in low gear and went right over the stone by sheer ferocity; he was never a subtle driver, Kemble, but he often got you there. We kept the off-wheels on the edge of the track, the near-wheels took the countryside as they found it; and found it rough, I thought from the noise, which in fact was the crushing of young rose-trees. Some thirty yards we did like that, and then two walls

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came in together, leaving a gap some five feet wide. Without emotion, Kemble tugged on his hand-brake. 'Looks like they've got the fuming map all wrong,' was what he said.

A brick-paved yard was on the other side of the gateway, the house enclosed two sides of it. How large a house I could not see, with the rain shredding and twisting my torch's beam; I might have been in a Hoxton alley. It was empty, I thought, seeing no dribble of light from a window, forgetting how far the night had gone. And that pleased me, as if the fairies had seized the Dorchester and dumped it for us there.

To get the outfit turned about was fantasy; men wide awake could not have done it then. Sometime there would be hell to pay, but that was to-morrow's issue. I yelled to Kemble to switch off (in vain, for he was asleep already) and like a calf new-born I started to explore.

The door I found was bolted, the window next it fixed with the catch. But a window farther on gave in to the persuasion of my jack-knife, I wriggled through to a passage and thence to a room.

The room was in faint sunset from a fire almost dead; which I could save, I thought, to dry our clothes. There was too much furniture, but space enough for the five of us on the floor. Someone lay sleeping already on the chesterfield, and I felt obscurely vexed that a damned civilian had taken the best place in the room.

I opened the window and shouted to the crew, they woke at last and came grumbling across the yard, too somnolent to realize the gift I'd found for them. 'Try and rouse that fire,' I said to Borden, and we shed our harness on the floor and shared out Weights from the one dry packet we had. Somewhere, remotely, a dog was barking.

The light in the room got brighter; having heard no footsteps I did not realize how. I was startled when I heard a voice — we were all too dead for talking — a female voice of the Mayfair brand and sharp as a wet towel.

'It doesn't occur to you that you're in a private house?'

Later, I saw the situation in proper focus. Three in the morning is an unmannerly hour for a call, and to make it in such a vehicle as

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ours, with a 25-pounder field gun bouncing behind, could argue a lack of breeding. Just then I did not see it so. Three sleepless nights can overturn far steadier tempers than mine. That she, this woman standing here all dry and warm, the candle playing on the rich tones of her Molyneux dressing-gown, that she should prate to us like that seemed an impertinence too broad to be amusing.

'Indeed?' I said like a schoolboy. 'My error entirely, I thought it was Hounslow Barracks.'

'And there happens,' she said, 'to be a sick woman upstairs, and a very delicate gentleman in this room.'

I don't remember how long we kept up this bickering. The others, I know, alarmed by her expensiveness, had gathered up their things and shuffled out before we had done. For myself, I was coldly angry and I argued sullenly till sleep swamped out my powers. 'So you think the stables good enough for soldiers?' 'You certainly can't go there, it's got my father's pedigree calves.' 'And you think your father's calves mightn't like our smell?' It amuses me to recall that our first talk went like that, with her as champion of owner's rights and me of the dispossessed.

In the end we slept in the stable and the calves had to put up with it. We purloined some of the straw that belonged to them, and their breath seemed to give us a little heat.

The last of that night's memories is detached and vivid, like a late morning dream; of a torch shining beside my face and a pair of gumboots, of a voice saying, 'I'm afraid this is all I could find.' He had an armful of rugs, the man wearing the boots, and he limped about the stable dropping them over us; he disappeared and came back again and with fearful trouble lit a Beatrice stove. He was short, this man, with a yellow quilt held round his shoulders, the rain fell spluttering on the stove from his green felt-hat.

'I'm afraid Virginia's a trifle cross, she worries about her refugees. . . . There's no sugar for the tea, but at least it's hot. . . . Another time, Sergeant, do let me know! Just let me know you're coming and I'll get everything fixed up.'

Like a lantern-slide that picture falls on the screen divorced from the ones before: from the hedges dithering past the quad, the angry

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woman in her dressing-gown. There is Borden squatting against my knees, still keeping alight the sodden stump of a cigarette; the Beatrice spitting and flaring, shaking the manger's shadow on the cobwebbed roof; Kemble's vast bottom beside a calf's head and the flow of Quindle's husky voice. One fragment more, so separate that I always wondered if I had only dreamed it: a woman's voice that came remotely through the noise of the rain, a deadly tired voice, 'But why must *I* be crucified!' We had drunk the tea when I heard that (if I ever heard it), we had huddled back in the rugs and straw and Borden's head was across my thighs. The thresh of rain on the tiles became a soothing noise, the sound of the calves sucking at straw seemed friendly. A sense of blessedness came over me, with no dreams trespassing, till daylight was showing under the stable door.

### 3

A FARMER called Chapman had the grazing which went up nearly to the house; an iron fence divided the pasture from the slightly shorter grass of the Orchilly lawn. A gate in the fence, made from an old bed-head, showed where a field-path started which curved uncertainly to the lower wood and on to the main road.

You cherish material things absurdly when you are going to leave them, you value everything which will stay in place. That, I suppose, is why I remember the bedstead gate, the curved and faintly pompous steps which broke the terrace wall. A shelter for cattle stood with its back to the lane, a small affair stone-built with needless strength. Beside it a rusty harrow lay bound with dead thistles, left there unthinkingly to begin its long decay. The stone pillars which had barred our way on that wet night were cracked from frost, one bent some way from the hips, the other had lost its spherical head. They would keep like that, I thought, having



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yielded just so far to the laws of dissolution; and when I for a hundred years had been cold beneath Africa those pillars would still be there.

As we walked up the lane I could hear the bus going on, the engine's stammer as the gear was changed for the hill. When that noise fell away there were only the sounds of Orchilly, somewhere a man sawing and the branches creaking from a wind which, in my recollection, always blew there. The map will tell you that the road bends till it comes within a few hundred yards of the house. But though you hear the lorries, the contour hides them; where the hedge breaks you see right over it to the puckered slopes of Nelden, the pine-ringed uplands with the Master and Mistress hills beyond. Those hills looked close in the frosty light of that November afternoon, the grey clouds high and the falling sun coming in beneath. On Nelden the stone walls showed so live you could almost touch them, the walls and the little oaks which leant from the wind.

'A dead-and-alive sort of issue,' Borden said, 'if you're asking me.'

'You don't like solitude?'

'I had too much,' he said, 'in fuming Lahore.'

It was kind of him to come, on this visit of expiation. For me it was simple duty, but Harry Borden had had no responsible part in the scandalous entry a week before. He came to support me, all furbished in the service dress he was not supposed to wear, merely because he was my friend. I wonder if I should have done so much for him.

As you came that way the house hid till you were nearly upon it; even then it showed you only its side. You got round to the front by another gate, here there were only a servants' door and the window where I had broken in; the scrimmage of pipes and water-butts, a kennel patched with grocers' plates, a lean-to roof with most of the glass gone.

I should have sought entrance at this side, though not by a window. But Borden, with his nicer eye for social values, insisted on what he named 'the front palaver'; we had, he argued, five

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stripes between us. Our promenade beside the big front windows, into which he frankly gazed while I stared glumly forward, might in itself have been penitential. But even then I had no terror of this place; for the paint on it, once white, was grey and flaked, on the gravel sweep the plantains swarmed in freedom.

In the cut of it there was no distinction; they had made a rectangle of bricks a hundred years before, too late for elegance, a few decades too early for banality. Its owners as they passed had added a window, or filled one up, as fancy took them; to keep the wind out, or the sun in, or the taxes down; but none had thought to improve its face with papulous bays, with trellis or modish castellations. The ivy spreading to the forthright porch, a reservoir of dust and martins, was there to witness rather a tolerance of God's work than shyness over man's.

The bell-chain which we pulled for etiquette brought only sterile whines and the fall of dust. But a pale, slack-breasted girl who had seen us came to open the door and a dog or two tore out. The tiled hall seemed familiar, with the clutter of its kind: odd gumboots sprawling on the oak settee, aged burberries, a broken racket-press. The smell was Orchilly's own, a version of the legal smell, not humble but not unfriendly.

The girl said, nodding us into a big room, 'I don't think she'll be coming down to-day, not Mrs. Quindle won't.' She bent to pick up a greasy child who was almost under Borden's feet; with the child on her hip she pulled out two hard chairs. 'You can't hardly wonder, with the weather like it is,' she said.

A man much shorter than the girl came forward quickly and flicked the chairs with his handkerchief. He bowed to us, smiling nervously, and his face with its anxious smile was like the child's.

'Kiss-Chick!' he said. (I write his name as everyone called it; the thing was a *pilau* of 'Z's' and 'N's' which we never learnt to sort out.) 'My boy Shalce, if you please,' he said, pointing to the child. 'You would also have a small children, Mister? No?' The girl went to the farther door (here all the rooms were passages) and with a practised, faintly weary voice called, 'Two more for tea, Lady Aulcheter!'

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I cannot recall with certainty who was there that Sunday afternoon. Vaughan Quindle I know was not; he had not then finished his second operational tour. An L.A.C. called Hewell was there; I remember the cautious way he managed his huge feet among Shalce and the kittens as he went round helping Aileen Kiss-Chick to set the table; and a dim, scrag-bearded man whom one came to associate vaguely with the Bodleian: McDowell? Macduff? — I cannot be sure. There were one or two more, Canadians from the Air Force station at Hantsmere; people came to Orchilly as on a moving staircase, with as little commotion, and at odd moments the vagaries of the Cernwith bus snatched them away. I see quite clearly Borden on a high-backed chair, with the service cap between his knees; his ironstone face in that matured indifference which he always wore when up on a charge. And I see Kiss-Chick's anxious face as he hovers behind his wife. The roll-top desk was there then; they moved it later to Virginia's room. It was Cleopatra, the cocker bitch, who had spread herself all over the hearth. Or else it was Mistinguette. And the kittens must have belonged mostly to Marie Corelli's October batch.

Yes, the roll-top desk was afterwards taken upstairs, and its place filled by a sofa from the landing. Those were the only changes, I think, and yet that first sight, hard now to recapture, was no more than a photograph of the room I came to know. It seemed almost sybaritic then, with its carpet and covered chairs, as all rooms do when you come from the world of scrubbed tables and draughty ablutions. I realized later on that no piece of it would be out of place in the Caledonian Market, that except for an item of *chinoiserie* here and there the whole of it would go for twelve pounds ten. They had no kinship, these scourings of a dozen lumber-rooms, nothing in common of time or place: the table with its turgid legs, the coy flutings of the ponderous overmantel. Yet something gave the whole a unity; perhaps the firelight in the weakening afternoon, perhaps that all the sturdy vulgarities were a little subdued with years. Or else you merely grew accustomed to seeing these things together, or they served to frame the presence of people you knew.

We had drawn our chairs to the table before Virginia came, and

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sat like children warned on party behaviour; while McDowell with nervous precision cut slices from a corner of bacon, while I put mentally the finishing touches to the apology I had framed, and Aileen with the skill of mothers fed Shalce with one hand as she passed the bread.

'His inside's something terrible,' she threw into the silence, 'Lady Aulcheter's doctor in London even can't make it out.'

Her husband smiled, deprecating this tribute. 'My motter die of vormce,' he said modestly, 'my grammotter also. In Varsaw.'

'You mean,' Borden asked, 'that you've got worms, or the baby has?' A good instructor in gun drill, he liked to get things clear. 'Then you want to eat charcoal. Crush it up and put it in your tea. With a splash of rum if you can get it. That's what we did in Ranikhet.'

McDowell pushed up his spectacles.

'So you've been in India, Corporal?'

Borden closed one eye, his equivalent to nodding.

'Up to the neck. Not that I care if it's India we're labelled for again. There are stations and stations, mind.'

The L.A.C. looked up at me. 'So you're for overseas?'

'Gone!' Borden answered him, dealing out a military secret which was known from the Stag at Kendal to the Viscount Wolseley at Carlisle, 'all but the brass-band on the landing stage. Embarkation leave a month ago, everything up to G.1098.'

Aileen, wiping her baby's mouth with Kiss-Chick's handkerchief, stared at Borden with fresh interest.

'D'you suppose you'll get wounded?' she asked, with a niggling appetite for the physical and disastrous.

Good-humouredly he tucked his hogged moustache up to his nostrils, showing the issue dentures in all their grandeur. 'Haven't had time,' he said, 'to read the operation order yet.'

It was all like that till Virginia came, a random tossing of sentences, as cricketers practise close-fielding. Before she had put the tray down she was varying our pattern. 'Ivan, you can't sit in that draught — Charles ought to be higher, Mr. Hewell, be-a-dear and get him a cushion — Aileen darling, you're getting nothing

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yourself.' And when she had changed my place with McDowell's, and set Borden to cutting cake, it felt as if a garment flapping from a clothes-line had been ironed to its proper shape.

I do not mean that she put us at our ease. Virginia (though I have been more at home with her than with any woman I've known) was not a person to do that. Rather, as she sat at the side of the table with her eyes on no one but Kiss-Chick and his child, she made the centre-piece which we had lacked. She was one who changed the temperature a little in rooms more pretentious than the one we sat in now.

It is a trick, I suppose, of dressing. Hers was the tall kind of body, though in fact she was not very tall; evidently she had the money and the name of a dressmaker or two. The aged jodhpurs she wore were more than a careful job, the hip-length overall, dirty and frayed at the cuffs, was never a trophy of the January sales. Even her thick brown hair, grossly untidy, showed that no fool had cut it, for on the strong forehead it lay in masculine folds and at the sides fell just so far as to offset a hardness in the angle of neck and shoulder. You will hardly lack attention if you can buy these things, and wear them.

'No, Mr. Hewell, I'm sorry, but I'm not with you at all. Father will agree, of course — and he'll quote Horace or some other half-baked romantic to prove his point. The simple fact is that people have got to live somewhere, and if you'd seen the inside of some of the oldy-worldy cottages you admire so much you wouldn't sneer at modern bungalows.' She had taken over Shalce and was patiently feeding him, using her left hand. Her right hand played with a cigarette which she put in her mouth again and again, sometimes striking a match but never lighting it. She ate nothing. One of the airmen poured the tea. 'Not that I want to see bungalows spewed out by speculative builders, who will make all the sinks too low and the lavatory seats too high and then put a rent on them which will only attract the rich week-enders from Preston. It ought to be done by the Rural District Council, and they should get hold of Humphrey Trevester to design them. Or better still Miriam Ohnsgarten who did the Wallace flats at Edgware.'

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The voice, just too emphatic, just false in key, was matched by the hands which I watched (wondering why she wore no ring); so good in structure, though larger than a woman's should be; so much abused by the rose varnish and the nicotine.

'Yes, but Davie, don't you think that all this fuss about the country-side is really a landowners' ramp! They talk about preserving the beauties of nature from the encroachment of the unsightly. What they really want is to preserve their partridges from the encroachment of the hungry.'

It was safe to look at her face, since she never glanced in my direction; and I tried to see if all the mind she had was in this chatter, the high monotone of the sherry parties from Wigmore Street to the Cromwell Road. She was thirty-four then. No one (except me) would have called her beautiful, but no one could describe her features as commonplace or poor. Her mouth, faintly rouged, was feminine, the build of jaw and virile chin too slender for a man's; but her high cheeks and forehead were shaped with an athletic spareness, above her active, deep-lit eyes the brows were masculinely bold. That much I saw as the firelight stressed the modelling of her profile, and though I disliked her it did not seem to me an empty face. A scholar's, I thought, done over youthfully by an English painter of the eighteenth century; a forehead you often find in country clergymen and at times in a humble swindler on the Epsom train. But the eyes, those eyes could not be meaningless. They belonged perchance to a vain or selfish woman, not to a small or stupid one.

'Problematic,' McDowell said, 'extremely problematic!' while the Canadians said, 'Well, that certainly is a point of view!'

I was thankful to have Borden there, who had no shyness nor any pusillanimous regard for the pattern of conversation. 'You want to go to Kashmir,' he said, 'if it's scenery you're after. You get a bellyful there, right smack in the face, any time you've nothing better to do. Reminds me —' Borden said (and I prayed it would not be the one about the Calcutta brothel) 'Reminds me of a bloke I knew in Singapore.' And without a fumble or a naughty word he told his story of the Irish corporal who, after

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committing a 'smallish murder,' had bribed the native police with lottery tickets for the use of his colonel's wife.

That, with its simplicity, loosened our feelings; for Virginia by her command of the room had made us near to children. We had gained some courage from our stomachs, the strangeness of a place with a carpet and women in it began to pass, we stuck our legs out and our arms on the table. It was a party of sorts, even then, as distinct from a ceremonial; and the two great logs which Kiss-Chick had put on the fire were blazing now, in answer to the darkening of the day outside.

But someone was missing; as in a house where a friend has lately died and sitting in the room he used you wait for him all the time. Perhaps we only caught that feeling from Virginia, who, attentive to Harry's nonsense, still showed a current of expectancy; or from Aileen, whose enduring eyes moved constantly to the door. If so, my memory has tricked me; for it seems to me that, from the start, this always crowded room had a constant emptiness if Quindle was not there.

He had a lighted spill when he came. (He always carried spills about, and burnt his fingers with them.) He limped to the table and knelt on it and reached up to the egregious contraption of wrought-ironmongery which hung from the ceiling. 'I won't swear it'll go now,' he said. 'I've been bull — blast! — (I beg your pardon, ladies) — I've been bullying the infernal thing all afternoon.'

He meant the New Cosmopolitan domestic gas plant, and I came to know what the bullying involved. That repulsive assembly of cylinders and camshafts cluttering half the wash-house was cousin to the kitchen range with its festoonery of flues and dampers, to the pristine telephone which you started up with a handle. This time he had been successful; for after a period of indecent snuffling, and the explosions that a boy provokes from his motor-bicycle, the contrivance on the ceiling budded into little flames, putting the room in a contralto light.

'Take no notice of it at all,' he said in his amused, shaggy voice. 'Sometimes it goes on working if you just ignore it completely.'

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Davie, pull the curtains for me like a good chap, my hands are filthy. Yes, Virginia my dear, I know I shouldn't, but if I only fed with clean hands I should starve.'

In fact, I never saw him (I think) with his hands perfectly clean. They were not the kind of hands you expect to be so, they were massifs of high vein and cornute knuckle, shod with a callous skin. A farmer's hands; too long exposed, you had said, to the Cumberland gales; as his face had been as well. You could see at once what he had given to Virginia, the close-piled eyebrows and the wiriness of his hair. And perhaps there was something of his eyes in hers, though not their shape or colour. Except for those traits, there was no definable resemblance; for Quindle's head, with its grey hair cut short, derived from a flatter, squarer stock. He was altogether small in body, and very tightly made. His aristocracy was wholly in the mouth and nostrils, hers in carriage and gesture, in slenderness and in her skin.

'No,' he said to Aileen, 'Charlotte won't be coming down. She had a wretched night, I'm afraid.' And to Borden, on whom his glance happened to fall, 'You know how it is, if you're feeling gut-rusty you don't want to spread your feelings over everyone else. I'm fearfully sorry, though. It's so amazingly kind of you people to come out all this way. We're both of us so grateful.'

I was talking with Hewell; we could talk as we liked now, all at the same time. But I could not keep one eye from looking past his earnest, stunted nose to the merriment working in Quindle's mouth and cheek-bone. He was leaning forward with his arms on the table; he devoured whatever happened to be near his plate, laughing at Borden with his mouth half-full, grinning impudently at Virginia's Fortnum & Mason small-talk. A gregarious creature he seemed, loving to exercise both tongue and ears; deep in contentment; one who had so long been entertained by the quiet facets of experience that he believed implicitly in the power of all new people, each bend in happening, to startle and amuse him. He was much older than this house; not in years, I mean (he was short of sixty-five), but in heredity. Yet the room fitted him as closely as the grey guernsey he was wearing. And although his shabbiness



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looked like a rich man's preference, it was in harmony with the threadbare furnishings.

He made, I supposed, a monthly visit to Keswick; perhaps an annual trip to London. I guessed that he would read his *Times* in the evenings, and once a fortnight a parcel of books would come from some subscription library. Those contacts with the thoroughfare are all such people need, from the time when they leave Marlborough or Caius. Maturity, which is the power of intimate appreciation, comes to them from the constant knowledge of one scene, from watching in many years the weft of sun and wind within a small horizon; connecting the ground's resilience under their boots with the height and strength of wheat-stalks, a calf's damp muzzle with the smell of brine. An ingenuous party such as this would do for Quindle as a whole week's pleasuring. To look on Orchilly as the Nelden hills did, feeling as much a part of it as the straggling walls; to finish ploughing a week earlier than last year, to mend soundly a hedge-gap which a young steer had made, to sharpen a saw in the evening: those subtleties for eye and hand would be enough, it looked, for him.

I said, through a gap in the talk, 'You're well away from the war here, sir.'

'In some ways — yes,' he said. And, self-reproachfully, 'I didn't get into the last one, either.'

'Were you living here then, sir?' Hewell asked.

'No,' he said, rather absently, 'not here. My wife was — a part of the time. (Aileen, my dear, I feel certain that Shalce is desirous to be emptied.) You haven't seen our pictures yet, have you, Sergeant? There's one on the stairs of Charlotte's Aunt Lucia, done in the manner of David. Two hundred guineas they must have paid for it, if they paid a bob. It was the portrait of someone else when it started, but the lady's husband went broke. A masterpiece. It's rather as if Alma Tadema had done Herodias from sketches by Landseer.'

With a rather unpleasant brusquerie, or so I felt it, Virginia said: 'So the Victorians are on the mat! Satan begins to sneer at sin.'

'I admit the impeachment,' Quindle said, for a moment gravely.

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'I am a reactionary, I disadmire all coloured vocalists and chromium bars, I dislike women preachers and the whole of Bognor Regis. I do not believe that either Saklatvala or the psychiatrists have put St. Paul and Plato in the shade —'

'— And you think that everything can be put right by liberal doses of charity —'

'— Not in your sense —'

'— And that the human animal will extricate himself from the whole tuberculous tangle of deceptions and oppressions by good luck and good manners in God's good time.'

'My love, that is a perfect précis of the symmetrical opposite to what I do believe. Davie, I entreat you to distract this young woman, or she will bastinado me into madness or the I.L.P.'

Then Virginia started talking to me about the plays she wanted to see in town.

An argument was dribbling on between Harry Borden and Aileen; he holding that his birthplace Swindon was superior in looks and gaiety to Deptford Park. With his hands and a limping verb or two Kiss-Chick explained the spiritual significance of Sobieski to McDowell; who, as at Gamaliel's feet, said, 'I understand now. . . . You make it entirely clear. . . . Aye, that's true!' We had lit our own cigarettes without asking, we told each other the way to the closet with no embarrassment at all.

Virginia had moved to sit beside her father, and their hands on the table were folded together, as lovers' are in cinemas. To him she hardly spoke at all now, except sometimes in quick contradiction. 'No, Father, you're romancing. . . . No, I never said that!' But whenever he spoke she was at least half-listening, now with contentment and now with almost hostile shyness like a mother with a precocious son. She smoked quietly now as men do, you could see she enjoyed the fire's warmth and the enlivening pressure of our crowded breathing. But if anyone there was faintly a stranger it was she. When Borden at last put his cup and saucer on his plate she got up quickly, collected a trayful of things and took them away.

With this chance to do what I had come for I followed her to the

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kitchen and started drying while she washed up; a job at which she was rapid, but not slovenly. For a time there was no opening: she talked so continuously of ballet and of her friends, dwellers in the border county between *Bystander* and *Time and Tide*. But when the lull came it was easier, with her back towards me, to launch on my peccavi.

'You know, I don't think you realize who I am. I really came to make an apology. The other night — I behaved abominably — there was no excuse, really —'

She turned round then.

'Of course, yes, I thought it was the same man — though all one's friends look alike in uniform. Oh, weren't we rude to each other!'

'I can only say —'

'No — my excuse comes first! No, not the usual female headache. It was Kiss-Chick — you see, Aileen never wakes when Shalce is howling (all teashop waitresses are stone-deaf, as you may have noticed) but Ivan Kiss-Chick always does. He hardly sleeps, anyway, with a duodenum like a Stilton cheese. So since all the other rooms were full I'd made him a bed downstairs, and then you and your rabble —'

'Yes, it was disgraceful.'

'— Especially as you took advantage of my womanly weakness — I was using my three swear-words and you had about fourteen that I'd never even heard of. Don't, I beg you, smash that plate, it's one of the last of Mother's Worcesters, she doesn't like our using it really. It's not a thing I like myself. I like the sort of thing the Cauditts are making at Burford, it's a development from Eric Gill's ideas.'

'And about the pedigree calves,' I persisted. 'I hope they came to no harm from our sharing their dormitory.'

'Harm? I doubt it. They're not pedigree, anyway. That's just the rustic form of snobbery — you can't just keep a sheep, it has to be a pedigree ewe, or a valuable tupper or what-have-you. As Father says, "It looks like any other sheep to me." Still, you've got to do something to keep your end up when you're in the country. That, in fact, is the sort of thing that staying in the country brings you to.'

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'You don't live here much?'

'Me? Oh God, no! I live in London. I'm only convalescing here. Of course, Father likes me being here, so I stand it as long as I can. Do you go to London at all?'

'At present,' I said, 'I go to Libya. At least, I think so. We're at four hours' notice.'

She said: 'That's a pity. I'd like you to come here again — Father likes having people coming in.'

'I suppose it's rather lonely —'

'He isn't. I've never known him to be lonely, I doubt if he knows what it means.'

She was darting about the gaunt kitchen, picking up the cats' saucers, putting things away. By imperceptible degrees her voice was changing, as if it let a chinchilla wrap slip from the shoulders.

'It's a gift,' she said candidly, 'being able to take things as he does. Of course, other people have it. If a problem comes along they say, "Well, it can't really be a problem, because we've never had any problems." Politically it's dangerous. I mean, where should we get to if everyone said, "This thing's too difficult for me to understand, so I shan't try"! I don't believe in that attitude, I just can't believe in it. If things hurt me, or hurt other people, I say "Something is wrong in organization and some action has got to be taken."'

'But your father doesn't?'

'Not in the same way. He seems to think that nothing is vitally wrong, that it's only a case for patience and adjustment. No, that may not be quite fair. He wouldn't lie down to anything. But he looks at things rather as a child does — you feel sometimes that his parents must be somewhere about. The time when my affairs got all tied up, and he came to see me about it, he said, "Let's go into some park or a picture-gallery and think." So very schoolboy, that was. Though I didn't really mind it, in the state I was in then. I despise people who want to dream over everything. But of course nobody, somehow, despises him.'

The airmen had gone when we got back to the dining-room, and Aileen, propped on the sofa against McDowell's side, had fallen asleep. Shalce was sleeping too, draped over Harry Borden's knees

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as if for a spanking, while Harry patiently expounded to McDowell the stratagem for getting civilian shoes repaired 'on the house.' For a moment then I felt an envy touched with bitterness of those who had no bus to catch. I envied even Kiss-Chick, sitting with his body twisted to ward off the pain in his stomach as he played draughts with Quindle: Kiss-Chick with his sallow, concave cheeks, his self-distrusting eyes. And Quindle himself, pulling at an empty pipe, smiling as Kiss-Chick took three Kings for one, I could almost feel rancour against him. I saw to-morrow with its early P.T. and the cool, scorched potatoes in our mess-tins; the bog outside the battery office and in the Nissen hut the dismal, draught-torn pictures of girls in dishabille. To-morrow he would sit here again, with the spaniels asleep beside his chair. He might hear as a faint echo the tale of men who died to-day from the flames inside a Matilda; and like all the echoes it would fade in the warm smell from the shippen, the familiar grey of the Master and Mistress hills. Grow slowly, I thought, at the trees' pace, and between the hills your sires had : there you will have safety; and the saw-edged winds of others' grief, the abscesses of poverty and failure, will never find you out.

He said to me just then, inconsequently: 'There's only one thing that's old about this place. It's a stable over on that side which was once an oratory used by the Franciscans. I like having that there. They were good as well as pious men, I think. . . . No, Ivan, I'm not going to open the breaches for you to walk in.'

When the time came, he said he would go with us to the bus stop. Unguided, we should stumble into something, he said. And Virginia, declaring that he was as clumsy in the dark as anyone, came as well.

She put on nothing extra except a scarf; and Quindle, I saw, by the worsening of his limp ('a touch of stiffness,' he called it) must have suffered not a little from that excursion. But with new visitors that was their way. Outside, the wind chastised us for the room's warmth; to me agreeably, and to Virginia too I think, for she was walking jauntily, and laughing, and asking us where we had left 'the tank or whatever it was' we had come in before. The ease and

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security we had had indoors seemed to go with us in the pond of light which hung from our torches.'

'You do realize,' Quindle said, 'that we never ask our friends to the house? — we expect them to come. If either of you could spend the night any time we can always put you up — a bit rough-and-ready, you know — it might be the sofa in the dining-room. Or there's my room. I can move to one of the rooms up-top, in many ways I like it better up there. Where's Davie McDowell sleeping, Ginnie?'

'In my room — I'm in the old library.'

I reminded them that we were more likely to be sleeping in a troopship.

'Then as soon as you come back,' Quindle said. 'Write to Orchilly, and if we're not here try our London house.'

'And that is — ?'

'Chelsea,' Virginia said ironically, 'only rather the other side of the river, if you know what I mean. What's left of it — I still live there myself.'

Quindle said thoughtfully: 'Yes, it was rather emasculated — that increased my prejudice against flying machines. Do you know — a most odd thing! I had been sorting out all my old correspondence and stuff, and I had two or three tea-chests full of rubbish I was going to get rid of. And when the top floor came down into the bottom floor, if you understand me, we found those boxes of rubbish completely untouched; "the smell of fire had not passed upon them"; while one small bundle of papers which I valued more than almost anything in the world had been completely destroyed. Wasn't that amusing!'

'Too droll for words!' I said.

The bus like a pantomime demon came floundering up its furrow, the gagged light slowing down stroked Quindle's face, which was smiling and twitching with pain.

'At any rate you must try to find us!' he said, as if it meant everything to him. 'Of course I might be back at my job. But I can't till I've got Charlotte well again.'

His job? But the girl in the bus squeaked, 'Hurry along, please!'

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and already Borden had carved his way inside. The door straddled behind my heels, and that afternoon's warm respite I supposed was altogether lost.

### 4

I REMEMBER wondering, as the bus moved on, what Harry Borden would say; fearing he had been hideously bored. And for a time he said nothing, he simply moved his cigarette from one end of his mouth to the other, using only his tongue, and spat little shreds of leaf sideways; regarding morosely the neck of a buxom W.A.A.F. who was wedged between us. You did not interrupt those silences of Harry's; they were part of his genius, that inured aloofness from the babbling emotion of mankind which made me a fledgling in his curtilage.

It was pleasant, in a minor key, to be in the twilit bus; civilians jammed against the uniformed, the hot air dense with cigarettes and perfume; where a tissue of small ribaldries and gossip was kept private by the bus's wheeze and shudder, the lugubrious plainsong of the faintly primed. *'And the whole — blooming — issue was — driven — by — steam!'* This tackle of bolts and plywood lurched hysterically on the corners, at every gear-change you were thrown upon the man in front; but we had bought the thing with our tanners and were not displeased with it. You suffered from no sanctions here, you could spit on the floor if you were tolerably accurate, or put your arm round any girl's shoulder. I doubt if you will find a luxury hotel to enclose that measure of liberty.

When Harry did open his mouth he made a considerable oration. 'You can't fuming-well shift that type,' he said over the W.A.A.F.'s head. 'They sit down here, in the fuming country, and the bleeding house starts in to rot, and they take no fuming notice. The war comes on, and they don't notice that neither.

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"Hope it won't upset the fuming cattle!" — that's about how they look at it. They go to London and the house caves in. "Fuming awful!" they say, "God blast the fuming airypplanes!" they say, and back they go to the bleeding country as pleased as a dog with two snouts and forget all about it. Then Sunday come round and half the bleeding pay-roll come staggering in and deploys all over the front parlour. "Crikel" they say, "what's up with the rest of the bleeding army? Lady Horse-Clipper!" they say, "ten more cups of fuming char for the bleeding soldiers. You heard about this war?" they say. "Fuming irregular!" they say. "Now for a nice chat about Mr. Bernard Bleeding Shore." And it all adds up to sweet F.A. for them.'

I said, giving miserly of my thoughts, 'Yes, they're pretty remote from the war.'

'And why not!' he said abruptly. 'Just because you've got your napper in a noose, which is what you draw your pay for, it don't follow as everyone's got to! You take yourself too fuming serious, m'lad, those bleeding stripes of yours have bounced to your block. I don't hold with the nancies, that I grant you. Nor yet the sow-bellied sons of bitches what sit on their backsides and corner the rhino. But if the whole fuming population's got to muck in, tarts and baskets and all, and the whole lot go to butchery together, then what's the pay-out on me and you!'

I said: 'You make me think of Lytton Strachey's words, "I am the civilization for which they are all fighting."'

'Taking it by and large,' he said indulgently, 'you talk more cock than any bloke I ever knew.'



WE did not go to Africa. Not then. We went to Norfolk instead. Why Norfolk I do not know, unless to measure our virility in the



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nauseous gales which are native of that region. The move involved the maximum of cost and inconvenience, a condition sympathetic to the fauna of Whitehall.

Before we left I visited Orchilly again, profiting from a free half-day and an R.A.S.C. lorry which was going in that direction. And on this occasion I first met Quindle's wife.

The encounter was accidental. Following what was plainly the local drill I had made first for the dining-room, but no one of the household was there. A dalesman sat by the fire and a clerkly man whose features seemed familiar (he proved to be Noel Unwick) was reading Whitehead on the sofa. 'You looking for Bernard?' this man asked. 'I fancy he's in Kiss-Chick's room putting down linoleum. I offered to help, but you know what it is — I always park in the wrong spot and get my bottom full of tin-tacks. You go upstairs and along the passage, the second door it is — you'll hear Bernard swearing.'

He was wrong, of course. Nearly all musicians are dead to geography. And I found myself in a room which had no Kiss-Chick flavour. It was one quite separate from the rest of the house, in that nothing there was gauche or redundant, the windows had no queasy lozenges, the walls were barren of lincrusta. With the window panes so large, and with such economy of furniture, it might have looked chilly in the hard light of North English winter. It was saved from that, I think, by its arrangement; not by the facile flair of Kensington amateurs, matched sets and sympathetic hangings, but by a sensibility derived from more spacious dwellings. The little bedstead with a wrought-iron head was Italian, at least in feeling, and so was the chaise-longue. A small, bow-fronted chest might have stood in a smoking-room of Holland House, the writing-desk in one of De Hoogh's pictures. Yet within this square of twenty feet these strangers were at peace, and you could not, by changing or moving one of them, have increased its harmony.

'You're looking for my husband?' Charlotte said. 'No, don't apologize — I was just too lazy to answer your knock. You know, it's really my chief function, now that I don't get about much, to

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direct people on to Bernard. Like the men they keep in little boxes in the Underground.'

I told her that I had been misdirected down below.

'By Mr. Unwick?' she asked. 'I don't know if Virginia sent him here, or if he's one of Bernard's friends.' If he's one of Virginia's young men it would account for his being vague, they're all a bit like that, they want to cling to a strong woman. But do sit down, you might just as well sit here till Bernard's finished mending the drainage, or whatever it is he's doing. Tell me, this Mr. Unwick, what sort of things does he compose? I'm quite out of touch with everything, my education and my taste stop short at Mozart. Is he talented, or just a flash in the Bloomsbury pan?'

The low chair she sat in was well towards the window, but she boldly motioned me to one nearer the window still, so that I had her face in total light. And 'This,' I thought, 'is what Virginia should have been.' In her mother, Virginia's features were re-cast as if a pupil's essay had been perfected, the palpable grace of Virginia's body became more subtle and more heroic. This woman's skin was dark, her hair a dark and masculine grey; there was nothing done that you could see to hide or embellish, and her brown dress, made to a deserted fashion, had nothing lambent in its quality. It was I suppose the steadiness of her fine and gentle mouth, a far-sourced vitality in the tired eyes, that made you find her beauty singular and immutable. It did not appear to me that she was ill, there was no wasting of the flesh, no fault in skin except a comparative paleness in her forehead. Only the texture of the corneas might have shown she did not sleep well, and her few movements were a little deliberate, as of one who must measure her resource.

'No,' she was saying, 'Virginia should not have gone back so soon. She hadn't got really well again, she was by no means fit for the work she does. Still, Virginia is one of those who pine for Town, so what is the use of arguing! She finds no virtue here, our peasantry is too Disraelian. To be virtuous in Virginia's eyes — poor darling — you must parade your neighbour's grievances, and you must also inhabit Aldgate.'

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There could be twenty reasons why I seemed distantly to recognize her low, patrician voice. Perhaps my mother, whom I scarcely remember, spoke with something of that timbre.

‘... But I’m afraid I enjoyed my London rather differently in the days when I had the use of it. Of course we were more restricted, one had no chance to cultivate a palate for drunken musicians and political Irishmen. A set of prigs we were — but prigs by the book, if you see what I mean. No, it’s no use pretending I have any of Virginia’s moral qualities, she gets them all from her father. I only pray that I’ve given the darling just enough of my egotism to prevent her virtues from killing her outright.’

I said conventionally: ‘I believe your daughter has a wide circle of friends in Town.’

‘More wide than circular,’ Charlotte said. ‘There was the Levantine she sent down here for the rest-cure she always prescribes. A cab-caller by profession, as far as I remember. We didn’t object to his washing his underclothes in the kitchen sink immediately after breakfast. But when he shot one of Bernard’s sheep with a twelve-bore, because “she make too high mooings in the sleep-time,” I felt that his view of social conventions was different from mine. But really, I mustn’t make fun of precious Virginia! She has a great deal of kindness, and the world has not been kind to her. It’s curious that my children should be so different. You haven’t met my son? That’s his photograph, over there. It’s badly done, of course, but it’s like him.’

She was right about its badness; it was a Harrogate production in the high-art mode, all vignetted lines and bogus chiaroscuro. But the man it showed, in Air Force uniform with the ribbon of the D.F.C., had features strong enough to penetrate this bowdlerism. He was very handsome; not in the titillating way but in the British airedale. It was the kind of face they use to advertise tobacco, that of a man just emerged from a street-fight, triumphant, slightly scornful and amused; yet not without distinction, for he had his mother’s eyes and nose, Virginia’s lower-face broadened towards pugnacity. Nature, you could suppose, had planned an Adonis;

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and growing tired of the work had sent the blue-print to be finished off at Brasenose.

'So embarrassing,' Charlotte said, 'when people insist on showing you their relations! I'll tell you what you ought to say, if you want to be faultlessly polite. You should say that he's very like me, and has splendid eyes.'

'The second part would be redundant,' I answered, having a working grasp of these formulæ.

'But about Virginia,' she pursued. 'Do you think he's at all like her?'

I looked at the photograph again. 'There's something in the line of the mouth,' I said, 'which reminds me of her.' And then, carelessly letting fly a bubble which came to the surface of my thoughts, I added, 'Something a little hungry.'

She laughed, covering her surprise and my own confusion. Directly I had made the remark it seemed baseless as well as gauche.

'Certainly they ate like little pigs when they were children,' she said; then, 'But perhaps I understand what you mean.' Her eyes turned towards the door, though I had heard nothing. 'You see, dear,' she said, 'I've kidnapped one of your young men!'

Tousled and dirty, Bernard had something of a boy's furtive satisfaction as he stood in the doorway. He seemed hardly to notice me; he went straight up to his wife and stood before her chair, hesitant, like a man faced by something inexplicably wrong in a machine he is working.

'I should have come before — I felt I must get that job finished off, Aileen's been badgering me about it. You haven't managed to sleep at all!'

'One can sleep any time,' she said, smiling. 'You don't grudge me a little conversation?'

'I was looking for you,' I told him. 'Unwick misdirected me —'

'You see!' Charlotte said, 'nobody even pretends nowadays that they accept my company on purpose —'

'I was afraid it might have been a strain for you, talking —'

'There's a kind of one-man conspiracy,' she said, 'to pretend that

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I'm an invalid. Bernard keeps it going so that he can have his friends to himself — he practically imprisons me here. That's the advantage of being a doctor — once your wife has complained of a slight tummy-ache you can use your sacerdotal status to bully her into permanent submission.'

Bernard smiled.

'And thus Science restores to the male what the Law has wrested from him!'

But his smile was unhappy. I had marked, at my last visit, a trace in him of something kin to shyness; the occasional hesitancy in speech or action of one who finds effort in making small decisions. That, it had seemed to me, came from chivalry, from knowing how easily a private vanity is grazed and how soon the wound grows septic. The shyness he showed now was of another kind. Like a speaker who has brought the wrong notes, he had lost all confidence. A doctor, she had called him. He did not look like a doctor now, as he fussed with the cushions and footstool, as he stared at her face with his teeth in his lower lip, for an instant smiled at her shame-facedly and then looked the other way.

'We might get you downstairs this evening,' he suggested. 'At least it would be a change. What do you think, *chère-aimée*?''

'It's rather a saucy notion,' she said, '— like moving St. Paul's out to Reigate. Do you think I could stand all that excitement in one day! But at any rate,' turning to me, 'we must meet again. You must come and see me whenever you're here — I promise I won't show you any more photographs.'

The cue, given so easily, allowed me to smile myself away. And I waited down in the hall, talking to Kiss-Chick about Shalce's bowels, till Bernard joined me there.

'I'd be terribly grateful for your help,' he said, hardly looking at me; he was still a little distracted, he seemed very tired. 'I promised old Filleul a load of dung — I've lent my horse to Chapman, his mare's gone lame — we could do it between us. No, not you, Ivan, you've got to keep warm, and Noel Unwick's no use, he'd only spoil his fingers. Come, Tangy — Patra!'

I followed him out at the back of the house, through a lobby full

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of preserving jars and rusty golf clubs, and across the vegetable garden. Even with his limp he moved so fast that I could use my full stride beside him.

'You've cheered her a lot,' he said, coming up out of silence. 'She doesn't often laugh like that nowadays.'

'You must think me a natural rhinoceros,' I said awkwardly, 'from the entrances I make to your house.'

'Not mine,' he said, '— Charlotte's. Or rather, it belongs to an uncle of hers — he let us borrow it when our Battersea home disintegrated.'

'You don't think I've done your wife any harm, butting in like that?'

'I doubt it,' he said. 'No, no, I'm sure you didn't, I'm sure it's done her good.'

He went on chewing the stem of his empty pipe, in a rather vexed way, taking no notice of the spaniels as they galumphed about his gaiters.

'No one understands it,' he said suddenly. 'I took her to Fraser Eskayne, he's wonderfully kind, he got himself out of all sorts of other work to attend to the case just because we were students together thirty years ago. He called Trohart in, they had X-rays done with that new American apparatus, I forget the name. And the radiograms showed nothing, absolutely nothing at all. They tried every dodge they knew to get some reaction — I mean, the kind of reaction they were looking for — and every single result was negative. Well, what is a man like me — about a quarter of a century out of date in his medicine — what am I to make of that!'

'But — there's pain?' I asked.

'Yes. Intermittent — sometimes very sharp.' He looked into my face, as if he doubted that this would interest me. 'Fraser talked about a psycho-analyst,' he said hesitantly. 'I was against that. I suppose you'll think me antediluvian, but I have a peculiar aversion from the idea of prodding about in the private corners of people's minds. One's body is so much less personal a possession. And Charlotte herself was against it. She is a very strong woman, you

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know. Her mind has always worked just as quickly and effectively in moments of stress. I always think of the way she behaved when Virginia was born, we were in a flooded village and the water was running quite fast through the bedroom. Of course it was funny to think of afterwards, but at the time I was dithering with anxiety. And she was calmly telling me about things I ought to collect from the other room before the water got any higher. Even when the pains were almost continuous. I suppose I'm a fool, but it seems to me silly and rather sacrilegious to go routing about in a mind of that magnificence, asking sly questions, nosing out little particles of dust and putting them into packets with bastard Latin labels. I refuse to believe that the mind of man is just a fortuitous arrangement of vermicular appetites. Not that it would mean anything if it were. We know that when we look at one of Leonardo's pictures what we really see is a certain inter-action of electrons and nuclei. And that is a kind of truth which is so nearly meaningless as to be equivalent to nonsense. Incidentally, the electrons and nuclei which render this gate will have to be newly directed. The sheep walk through practically as if it weren't there.'

We skirted the plough and struck over rig and fur to a minor crest. Blindfold, you would know you had reached this point from a sudden increase of the force of wind, which was moist that day, smelling of boggy turf and faintly of the sea. It is constantly a surprise to me how abruptly, in that country, you pass from tamed land to that where only the stumbling walls show human interference. Here we had come no more than three furlongs from the garden of Orchilly. Its roof, if you looked that way, showed above the trees. But as we stood now we saw only the moorland; to the north-east a single string of birches descending towards the beck, a hem of spruce on Easter Common; beyond and westward nothing but crumpled sheets of turf, ragged with brake and stone till they mounted in whispering greys against An Rìggreen Fell. I was to see that shock of land in April, when the play of sun in its folds would colour it superbly. But it moved me no more in that brilliance than on this sunless day, when livid clouds rode thunderously on the hushed concord of mournful greens. That sky, in winter violent,

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was seldom entirely still. In me it breathed serenity, as peace is borne for some rather by motion than by stillness. And the tranquil Orchilly of my remembrance is never without its wind-thrashed sky.

The shandrydan which served as wagon-of-all-work stood ready beside the muck-heap; we each took turn to load while the other held up the shafts. Forking the dung, I felt agreeably the pull on thigh and shoulders, with the sweat starting to creep. A pair of seagulls rode the wind about us and the smell of the fresh dung was quick and sweet.

'Sometimes,' I said, 'I think I should like to farm. But I suppose that's only the sentimentality of all townees.'

'I farm,' he said reflectively, '— if you can call it farming — to salve my conscience. Somehow I feel you've no right to enjoy the country unless you work it. Of course it isn't only that; apart from what we consume ourselves the farm gives me a small margin of profit, enough to make me feel I don't live entirely on Virginia's earnings. I take it seriously, I read all the books which tell you how to farm when you can lay your hands on a thousand pounds now and then. And having wept a little I use what smattering of gumption my Creator gave me. But I'm a poor hand at it, I don't understand English methods or the English soil.'

He took the shafts again, and we began moving the cart to where the ruts took on the semblance of a track; with him as draught-horse, me steadying and braking it as well as I could from behind. He said spasmodically, as the road in a distraught fashion led us down to Randall's Gift,

'There's a Calvinist within me that won't be exorcized. That's what I mean about farming for conscience' sake. It's a niggling sense that you ought to sweat to pay for so much beauty. (Hold hard a moment, I'll rig the spade to the wheel as a drag.) And that applies, more or less, to every form of pleasure. It's all right for a time, but then I catch sight of myself and feel ashamed of so much happiness. Surely a man of any charity can never be altogether happy, surely the good can never for a moment blind themselves to the misery that's going on. Especially now. That's what Virginia



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feels, I imagine, and in my reason I think she's right — though I wish she didn't.'

I asked: "So you do enjoy this work?"

"So little in life I have not enjoyed — so much of it has been deliciously amusing. But "work" — you don't call this "work"!'

'You would,' I said, 'if you spent your life farming. I gather you haven't done it before?'

'Not seriously. I've grown what I can, and kept a few chickens or whatever my plot could feed.'

'In London, you mean?'

'No, no, we were only in London for a time, collecting ourselves. We were nothing but squatters in that prairie. No, my home is in China.'

The shandrydan had the devilry of inanimate things; its off-wheel sought the choicest pot-holes, the near-wheel, as you jerked the other free, would inanely plunge upon the verge and fix itself between two rocks there, while the improvised tailboard abruptly fell, projecting a bushel of manure on to my knees. We did the last forty yards at a run, impelled by gravity rather than zeal; by one good accident it was right at Filleul's gate that the contraption finally overturned. There we stayed for a time to recover poise; I on my knees clinging senselessly to the free near-wheel, he fastened securely by the nearshaft in the quickset fence, dumb and shuddering with laughter.

Thereafter we went in to report. Only Filleul's mountainous sister was at home (Josie's Pet, as everyone for some reason called her) and we went through the preposterous conversation which always seems to take place in cottage kitchens, where you cannot move an elbow without knocking something over, where unthinkable concoctions jig and splutter on the range, and your hostess, standing formidably against the one small window, is deaf as a bank manager from the draughts and damp.

'We've brought the droppings I promised Sam'l,' Bernard shouted.

'Very nicely, thank you, sir,' Josie's Pet roared back. 'I feel the cold in my joints, that I won't deny, Mr. Quindle.'

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'Are you rubbing your legs with the ointment I gave you?'

'Yes, Mr. Quindle, the good Lord can save even an old woman like me.'

'Yes, Josie's Pet, God is very good to us, giving us these glorious hills to look at while some are away fighting.'

'Eh!' (with an outburst of laughter) 'I wouldn't wear such things, Mr. Quindle, not if you gave me a hundred pound!'

And so on; while cats leapt down from unexpected corners and tore away between our legs, a cuckoo-clock performed prodigiously and a bead of sweat dangling from Josie's Pet's beard grew large but never quite cast off.

'Heavens, how she does smell!' Bernard said, as we trundled the cart up the slope again towards the house, dragging a shaft apiece. 'I doubt if she's washed farther down than the neck for sixty years. But I'm very fond of her. Her eccentricities are of the agreeable kind. Whenever she travels in a train, which is two or three times a year, she goes to the engine-driver and thanks him personally for his services. "I could never steer it so straight," she says, "to keep the little wheels on the railings." I have a friend in China, a woman with twenty-three living grandchildren, who's very like her. The same kind of active courtesy and the same unshakable independence.'

I said without reflection, 'It's lucky you're not in China now.'

'It's damnable!' he said abruptly. He was panting a little; with his lameness, he must have used at every yard just twice the effort the job was costing me. 'When I think of all the Chinese have given me! And now, when they're at the apex of their suffering and their endurance, I have to be skulking thousands of miles away!'

'You came back before the war?' I asked.

'Before it broke into flames at this end. In '38, we came back. I really hadn't much choice in the matter. It was a young Lieutenant-Commander who brought us away, a nice fellow: he'd have been in a very awkward position if we'd refused. Someone had told him, you see, that the Japanese were going to shoot me if they caught me again. They said I was a spy — well, to be quite fair,

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I suppose I was, in a way. The young Commander was one of those who consider it terribly important not to be shot; a very proper attitude, of course, in a fighting man. And then I had Charlotte's feelings to think of.'

He spoke, still biting his pipe, in segmented periods, as water comes from an air-locked conduit; now as if to himself and now to me. His talk was often a peculiar mixture of caution and candour; as if a hawker, hurrying with an armful of his wares, were confused and delighted when anyone turned to buy. 'Yes,' he said, as we stopped for a breather, 'it was disconcerting, the way all that happened. It felt as if only a few moments went by between the one when I was wriggling past the Jap sentry and when we sailed into San Francisco — and most of it seemed to have happened quite apart from my own volition. I'm not used to that. I've always made my own plans, and the result has always had some relation to them, even if it was only a sort of caricature. So easy, you know, to say, "Well, if I must, I must," and stumble out to a whaler. And so damnably hard to get back again.'

I said: 'You mean to go back after the war?'

'Oh, I shan't wait for that. Yes, there are technical obstacles, but they amount to nothing in the end. The little gentlemen in the Foreign Office will do all they can to stop me — they'll pass me from hand to hand, and make me fill up forms over and over again, they'll keep saying "No, No" and babbling about political considerations and strategic prohibitions and diplomatic priorities and the Treaties of Aix-la-Chapelle. But those people are mere amateurs in obstruction compared with any Chinese customs-officer. I shall defeat them by guile and jobbery. When you have to deal with bureaucracy you only require a backslapping acquaintance with one or two of the shamans, and to be totally unscrupulous. My god-fathers!' he said ferociously, 'do they really think they can interrupt my life's business with their piffing fortification of paper-fasteners and cross-references, those wigs who would no sooner use a third-class carriage than a Javanese brothel!'

He took both shafts as he said that, and started to pull the cart by himself, rather as if I had been contradicting him and outworn his

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patience. It was startling to see him so angry. But the tornado passed as rapidly as it had come. Before we reached the outer gateway he was talking as quietly as before.

'No, it's only the problem of getting Charlotte well again. None of the other difficulties is anything at all by the side of that. And there's no short cut. At least, I can't see it. There must be some way, there's always some way, but I'm blown if I know what it is. I tell you, it bothers me rather — me a doctor, you know — it bothers me being defeated like this. Tell me — I've never asked you — are you married?'

'I was,' I said; and he left it there.

We put the cart away, and I got the pig's food while he did the milking. Then Aileen called us in to tea.

In their flattering way the dogs pretended to know me, and Aileen remembered that I took no sugar. (That was professional, but symptomatic of her kindness; it is her kindness I always think of, still more than her ingenuous bravery.) Bernard said nothing throughout the meal, he only listened and smiled. In that house you were not obliged to talk, or to wait your turn for talking. I forgot, munching and making toast at the same time, that the room I saw was hardly older in Orchilly than I was. Rather I felt as a child whose parents move to a new house; who has stood forlornly in the empty rooms till the furniture comes, and feels then with entire contentment that his world has been put back for him.

## 6

HE wrote to me in January, returning some money I had lent him to give to Josie's Pet. I have the letter, in a Greek-scholar's hand on the back of a galley slip, since flecked with Silvo and N.A.A.F.I. tea.

'My dear Roger, Enclosed, in defiance of P.M.G.'s Regulations,

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your Pound. If it was only ten bob, give alms to the local publican.' (This, I have learnt, was a customary stratagem of his. Chronically short of ready-cash, he borrowed ten-shilling notes from everyone; and, if the lender seemed poorer than he, made a double return.) 'Do not in any case send anything back. I am too well-bred to care for money, and at the present time I am gluttoned with it.

'In explanation — I have sold one of my heifers. For precision, the Strumpet of Carlisle. And honestly, too, as honesty is reckoned in the cattle-dealing world. I grant the man who bought her (Colonel Gillish of Windermere — but no, you haven't met him) is presbyopic beyond the normal for old soldiers, and had drink taken. I grant also that I had Josie's Pet with me, and he may have been a little confused about which of the two I was offering. But a man unable to guard himself against rogues has no business to be at the Cernwith market at all. Did I tell him that the Strumpet was good between the shafts and a hare over fences? If so, it was mere allegory, and the common patter of the trade. The light was certainly poor, the heifers numerous and inclined to amble kaleidoscopically. Gillish, I think, caught sight of a stern he liked the look of, tried to work his way round to the bows and came to the wrong beast — mine, to wit. I think he was a trifle puzzled. He got right underneath to examine her belly (he may have thought he was buying a motor-car) — I was terrified lest she should lie down, as she often does when bored. Then he walked all round her several times, and when he stopped she started to walk round him, lowing most dolorously, examining his trousers from every angle like an ardent amateur of colonels and even tasting the back of his neck. A humiliating exhibition — I was never so embarrassed. He kept muttering "What's wrong with the bitch — does she think she's a beagle! Damn you, Quindle, why can't you whip her off!" And Josie's Pet was babbling like a maniac, "You could have that pixie in your own front drawing-room, Major, and never tell her from a lady Christian." Indeed, I only took the old man's money in the end to rescue him from further indignity. And felt, at the time, no single qualm of conscience. Should I consult a doctor or a priest?

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'A sober Christmas. Darby and Joan, plus of course the Kiss-Chicks and one or two more of the people Virginia sends down. She was too busy to come herself, and Vaughan's leave was stopped for some reason. Chester Gaul of the *Telegraph* arrived for breakfast but went straight on to Glasgow to "cover" some political eisteddfod. (The reason why journalists see everything out of focus is that they never stand still to look at anything.) Two or three Sappers for lunch, with old Van Elster of Trinity, who takes in more food and simultaneously lets out more Hegel than any man I know. Bernhardt was brought to bed of five kittens on his overcoat in the hall immediately after the meal. A kind of pagan tribute, I suppose, but awkwardly offered. All piebald and hideous — I suspect that Abraham Lincoln is the father. I had, detestably, to drown two. You will see that in the country nothing ever alters. I become entirely hircine, and almost resigned to this metamorphosis. None the less, I shall get back to China.

'Charlotte is no better, I'm afraid. I may try to get Fraser down again. I wish he would let me pay him (or, more accurately, let me owe him some money.) Do you, as I suspect, think that China is just a monstrous bee in my exiguous bonnet? You may be right. No, I am certain you're wrong. I shall try to explain, sometime, why China's peculiar importance has a tougher foundation than my sentimentality, or anyone else's. When you know places — I mean, when you grow with places, Turfan or Tufnell Park — sentimentality withers. Affection may remain, as in those marriages which God makes happy. If not affection, loyalty; which is something kin to the way your hand and an old chisel are joined, and nothing to do with sentiment at all.

'And your Christmas? Not much, I suppose. A noggin all round and the C.O.'s seasonable greetings in Part I Orders — that I believe is the military Rubric. Useless to pretend that anyone who is not deaf and dumb as well as blind can lose himself in the festival of love when all the polyglot whispers, no longer evanescent in the wide air, are of the bitterest anger. It is facile, it is falsehood to take as your example of suffering some twopenny piece of pain, a broken leg or a bout of fever. The woman whose child is taken away, the

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man disgraced before his own son, those are sensations we must realize before we start to talk of pain at all; and that is not the practice of popular theologians. If I find the contemplation of suffering hard to bear, I find the thought of hatred harder still. When one man flogs another for his amusement — our progress has brought us back to that — it is the flogger I pity. Not emotionally. As to my feelings, I could go for that man with fist and teeth, with anything I could lay hands on. But don't you think with me, when one's mental temperature has fallen, that there is something pitiable beyond the reach of ordinary pity in one who carries within him his private hell, who can see trees in flower and feel nothing but his own internal, hungry filth? Is love, however we conceive it, a force to penetrate as far as that?

'No, I shall not fall into the temptation and put a reach-me-down solution on the counter. If those solutions were any use I should happily have put my mind in dust sheets many years ago, as some other Victorians did. The nearest thing I ever had to an answer was given me by an old study-book man in Lan-Chau. He said, "If I had never been awake except in darkness, a single spark flying would tell me there was daylight the other side." Because I know there is hatred, and that I hate it, I know there is love which I must love. I almost know that where hatred goes so far there will be a love to match its distance. I don't know, I only feel, that when one absorbs the other it is hatred that must be absorbed. Is that enough to justify the experiment, that of having conscious beings on this star, free to hurt and to bless each other? That question, I believe, is beyond anyone's answer. For myself, I only know the particular feeling of relief I have always had on Good Friday, a sense of clearness and stillness, a belief, outside reason and impregnable against assault, that the answer has been given and that there is nothing natural or extra-natural with force to alter it.

'Don't let the psychiatrists get hold of this, or they will say I have a sublimated passion for my grandfather's aunt. Midnight. I must get at my translation, which I should have been wrestling with an hour ago instead of chattering to you, you tiresome fellow. It goes slowly, and I begin to wonder if I shall finish (I had done nearly

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70,000 words when the MS. perished by Act of Goering). The labour cozens me, however, with the imbecile belief that I am not entirely a parasite, even now. Charlotte sends her love. The Kiss-Chicks also. I mentioned your name to Cleopatra, and she instantly wee-weed on the carpet with her simple joy. Ever affectionately — BERNARD Q.'

## 7

LET me say, in favour of Vaughan Quindle, that when I first met him his manners were good: simple, and with no whiff of condescension. His appearance, too, outshone the photograph I had seen; it was the kind of face so simple to take properly that photographers bungle it unless they have studied painting. You may call it no virtue in a man to please the eye: consider, though, a covey of male tourists on the staircase of Blickling Hall, and you will realize how men by their looks can defeat the whole labour of genius. The shape of Vaughan's large body delighted me even when it provoked my envy. His nose and forehead were of Julian arrogance, the eyes, recessed like his father's, had that remote and still regard which you see in fishermen and priests. So often the pride of mothers has to find sustenance in egg-eyed, shapeless sons: my thought, when I first saw Vaughan, was 'Surely it is enough in life for Charlotte merely to have borne this man!'

He met me where the lane turns. He said, 'It's Roger, isn't it? — Father always talks of you — I've been longing to know you myself.'

This was in March. We had spent four months or more making our foul quarters in the Attleborough prairie just fit for soldier habitation. Now they had moved us west and north again to a place a mile from our autumn camp. Strategically, the conception of this shuttle-movement may have been brilliant. It seemed to us a long



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way round. As soon as we were installed I telephoned to Orchilly: a lengthy business, for the postmistress who worked the Nelden switchboard had first to inform me where each member of the Orchilly household would be at this time of day, then to tell Aileen Kiss-Chick, who answered, that the gunnery soldiers were back again, with other intelligence, won from a mosaic of conversations, about the general movements of His Majesty's forces. When at last we were suffered to converse, Aileen told me that she didn't rightly know if Dr. Quindle would be in on Thursday, she couldn't really tell if Mrs. Quindle would be well enough to see me, she thought the doctor's rheumatism was no worse, if I knew what she meant, but whether it was better she couldn't rightly say. From this I deduced that conditions for a visit were broadly favourable.

It was like going to meet a woman with whom you have been friends in childhood: expectancy veined with misgiving. With the passing of mid-winter Orchilly would have changed in looks, as the quarry-pocked valley which held our camp had. They would have new friends now, from the camps around, and they had heard all my stories. It was perhaps illusion, I thought as the bus laboured up to Hogarth's Tongue, that Orchilly stood separate from the rule of change by which things tire and lose their radiance, catching the infections of fashion and triviality. The house which I had thought of through these comfortless weeks as the living remnant of a lost tranquillity might in this new season be only its deathmask. Contentment, I thought, is something capricious; it was risky to seek it in the same place again.

But the bus, as it came to rest, lurched in the same pot-hole, the platform for the churns looked no more decrepit than before. The tortured skeleton of a bicycle still sprawled in the hawthorn, though some visionary patriot had put a notice, 'For Salvage,' beside it. Only the new-stitched colour of the hedge was an astonishment to heart and eye.

Chiefly the change was for my skin and lungs. This was a lane where the wind would meet you in both directions, and had rubbed my face with a harshness no more disagreeable than your own dog's tongue. It was a cold wind still, but the harshness had all gone,

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it was a patting instead of a slapping wind, quietened by the sun which showed now and again between the high, fast convoy of white clouds. It bore damp odours, as the autumn wind had, but of a homelier kind; not of the high bogs and salty, mountain mists, but of water trickling through stone and moss, of valley ferns and faintly, with the farmstead smells from Randall's Gift, of cowslip and hyacinth. This richness of sensation, born of moss and stippled cloud with the quick green light on Nelden, possessed me by degrees as the bus's exhaust was brushed away. I put my Player away unlit and realized, if the old nostalgia were gone, a new one would come cousinly to take its place.

It was Mistinguette who appeared first, careering belly to earth and barking in her imbecile fashion to every bird that passed. She swerved to avoid me as late as she dared (she was never a valorous bitch) and then stopped in a clumsy telemark, returned to cross-examine and finally leapt up at me. I had hardly got loose from this enchanting embarrassment when Vaughan came along.

We went up to the house together, and he told me on the way that Bernard was out; he had gone to set a dalesman's leg over at Briermoor Fell, and he might or might not be back to tea.

'He'll enjoy the job,' he said. 'Apart from fighting with officials, I don't think there's anything he fancies quite so much as a bit of doctoring. And yet, you know, he's ridiculously diffident about it. He says he's all out of date in his medicine, after being abroad so long. I suppose that's true in a way — he can't give people the clinical jargon that they get from the men just out of Guy's. That's one reason why he's had no regular practice since we left Battersea, only a locum now and then. He won't attend to anyone but the poor if he can help it — they worry less about what you call things. Still, if I wanted my gall-bladder out or something I'd sooner go to him than anyone else. After all, what saved the lives of thousands of Chinese is not likely to work like the Black Death among the English. . . . Now which is your chair?' he asked as we came into the dining-room. 'It's so long since I got any leave, I'm all out of touch.'

He went to get the tea himself, leaving Shalce to entertain me.

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(Aileen, by that time, had become chiefly concerned with the farm work; she proved to have an unexpected instinct for the handling of beasts, which had formerly scared her.) Stubbald Oakley, in his dressing-gown in the corner, was labouring savagely on alternative scripts for *Madonna of La Paz*, cursing the whole race of chittery-nittery authors and the typewriter he was murdering, while two or three land-girls, dressed up as if to represent the Spirit of Husbandry in a Welwyn mime, giggled furtively on the sofa. 'Co-patta!' Shalce said, 'Um-copatta? — copatta-do!' He crossed the hearthrug on his feet, like Blondin high over Niagara, and stood clutching my trousers; a rather troubled person, perplexed, I thought, by his dual heritage. He did, in that interview, once take my hand and plant a wet kiss upon it; but he would not smile, he only repeated wistfully, 'Co-patta? Patta — on!'

I asked Aileen, at tea, where Kiss-Chick was. He was in bed, she told me, the change of season had gone to his stomach again and he hadn't been up for several days.

'But it's wonderful what he can do in bed,' she said, 'really you'd be surprised! Making all sorts of plans, he is, for the snack bar we're going to start when we get back to Deptford. A bit more class, it's going to be, than the one what got smashed up. He's started doing the cards now, white for the drinks and red for the eats. You'd be surprised, the things he thinks of.'

I thought I saw, within her enthusiasm, the faint colour of patronage; that maternal tolerance which women have for most of the preoccupations of men. She was dressed as when I had first seen her, in a velveteen affair of that repulsive mauve which one associates with the Edgware Road, with the same high, cheap shoes; but the gales had browned her skin, the change in her flesh and shape were remarkable.

'But what about you?' I asked. 'Are you longing to be back in London?'

'Oh, but that's what he wants!' she said.

'Then he must be bughouse!' Stubbald Oakley barked. 'This is the only place on God's earth where it's possible for any sane man to work. (Yes, I will have more toast. You, darling — the

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soubrette with the gig-lamps — be a dear and bring it over.) I tell you no one can work in Ealing, and Denham is worse. One is simply persecuted by casting-touts morning, noon and night.'

'Do you really think so!' Aileen said, having I suppose escaped such persecution.

'I do. And how in God's name do you spell the idiot word "idealism"? — I know there are two e's but I don't see where in hell they go.'

'Roughly at each end,' Vaughan told him.

And the girls on the sofa fearfully searched each other's empty faces, wriggling their stupendous backsides between the capricious springs.

Still Bernard did not come. I should have gone to meet him, but Vaughan said he might use one of several routes. I was H.Q. guard commander that night, but I thought I could catch a later bus from Cernwith or work something over the telephone; and I stayed on till the girls had departed and Aileen had taken Shalce away.

Then it was Charlotte who came. Vaughan was talking to Oakley. She came in unobtrusively (were it possible for such beauty to be unobtrusive) and took a chair by the fire as if she had recently left it; but I saw in Vaughan's quick glance that he was greatly surprised.

'Mother, should you!' he said.

She gave her answer to Oakley, choosing instinctively the one of us who would best reflect her. 'They hate it when the ghost starts walking,' she said. 'But if one has the reputation of a *malade imaginaire* one may as well accept the privileges of eccentricity! I mean to stay down here, Vaughan, just until I can stand the sight of Cousin Adelaide's furniture no longer. So you needn't fear a long, dull evening.'

'I see nothing wrong with the furniture,' Oakley began, catching sight of a conversational pony he could ride. 'It all hangs together.'

'That's what is wrong with it,' Charlotte said.

The room's homely and florid comforts appeared, indeed, to

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have grown more dingy from her entrance. She wore a turquoise dressing-gown of terry velvet, so long that as she sat it showed only her bare feet, slender and beautifully veined; and round her shoulders a Kashmir shawl in which the ruling tone was an autumn red. Yet the flow of these clothes and their vital colour did less, I think, than her throat and forehead, with the grey hair piled like a wave at point of breaking, to reduce the room to an auctioneer's lot. While Vaughan fussed with cushions I looked at Oakley's hatchet face, at the quick, measuring movement of his eyes, and fancied I had some idea how his thoughts were going.

'I'm afraid Bernard leaves you to yourself most of the time,' Charlotte said to him. 'He treats all his guests in the same way, if that's any comfort.'

'It is never any comfort,' he answered, 'to know that one is treated the same. If you, dear lady, tell me that you allow all his friends to see you in that exquisite *peignoir* I shall burst into tears. Let me be just to Bernard, however. This morning, when he set me to clean out that most malodorous pigstye round at the back — or stable, did he call it — he said, "This is a job I only give to my most intimate friends."'

Charlotte nodded. 'So he still uses that formula? I only warn you: if ever he says, "We've known each other a long time, you and I," you had better take the first train you can get to London. It always means that the cess-pit has got to be dug out.'

She said that without smiling. She had a masculine trick of omitting all the exclamation marks, from eyes as well as voice; and to-night I had more strongly the impression I'd received at our first meeting of features responding always a fraction late to a ventriloquist's control. Very pale, her face was, but nowhere slack or feeble; and her eyes, for all their tiredness, said nothing of ill-health.

'I should not like it!' Stubbald said vehemently. 'I shall not be so pharisaical as to pretend I should.' The theatre's child, he could say nothing without a slight excess of gesture, his body performing what tennis players know as 'the follow-through'; and I do not think he could have recited an Army Council Instruction except in

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a voice charged faintly with emotion. 'And yet, for the most part, I envy your husband. He works, he dirties his hands — not with ink, but with soil. (I'm not referring to the particular disagreeability you were mentioning just now.) He creates — he makes the earth give us our food. He goes to bed weary — and satisfied. And I — what do I do?'

'Oh yes, what do you do?' Charlotte asked. 'I'm afraid no one has told me.'

Only she could have asked him that without mortal offence.

'I make pictures,' he said despairingly. 'I pursue a will-o'-the-wisp. Always some dream, some miracle pattern of beauty and of truth. And always the multitude, the serried mass of bovine faces, howling for me to amuse them with tawdry inventions and fizzy romance.'

'Then why not take up some other business?' Charlotte inquired.

'Because the cinema is my vocation!' he said rather sharply. (And I could hear then the engine-hum of sincerity beneath the rattle of his rococo speech.) 'I am driven by the winds of mania. I have seen something—the distant, the splendid, the unattainable — it haunts me and I shall pursue it as long as I live.'

'You probably will,' Charlotte agreed.

She was not looking at him any more, but at Vaughan, appraisingly, as professional buyers examine silk while the seller looks on.

'It is always asserted that men are the reasoners,' she said with detachment. 'More and more I think it is they who live by intuition. If I had to decide upon a profession—which of course was considered unladylike at the material date—I should ask certain questions: what are the things and services for which people are prepared to pay money (since money is the universal requirement, the saint's as well as the stockbroker's)? — what are my largest abilities, how far are these abilities likely to carry me if I sell them in this market or in that? And having made such basic calculations —'

'And having made such basic calculations,' Vaughan said brutally, 'you would find yourself face to face with a recruiting-sergeant. And he would solve all your problems by saying, 'Your

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abilities are neither here nor there, m'lad. Your profession is to go out and break your blooming neck.'

'It is you,' Charlotte answered, without change of voice, 'who illustrate what I mean better than anyone else. To begin with, you were in a reserved occupation — but that perhaps is beside the point. You had the abilities which would have made you an efficient officer in the Army or Navy — I mean that you had experience of organization and were not frightened of people either singly or in masses. Efficient officers were more urgently required than any other war commodity, since it takes a particularly long time to produce them when you first have to turn men into efficient human beings. So that was your rational course. But because it was more romantic to steer an aeroplane you did not listen for one moment to such arguments.'

'Do you mean, Mother, that I fancied myself in grey-blue, and being a kind of wonder bird-man? Because if so —'

'That's the romance of the half-baked. The romance which drew you along like a rustic swain was the high probability of getting very quickly shot into small bits.'

'Your reading of my mind is perhaps not outstandingly subtle,' he said coldly.

'Then why did you take up flying?'

'Because it was freer than most things from a lot of damned nonsense. The older services (begging your pardon, Roger) are atrophied from the navel up with custom and procedure. All that matters is being a Decent Chap, going to the right tailor, saluting the flag at sundown (or moon-up or whenever you salute flags) and generally not being a cad, sir. And the gup they talk about looking after the men —'

'But you don't tell me you find nothing romantic in flying?' Stubbald broke in. 'The vast loneliness, the mysterious separation —'

'One is more aware,' Vaughan said, 'of the peculiar discomfort of sitting in the same place for very long periods. Between working an aircraft over Hanover and working a sewing-machine over a tailor's shop in Huddersfield I should expect the latter to be the

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more poetic experience. Of course, working the kite requires a little more skill. That is generally granted — except by my mother. And I make bold to suggest that it may be more useful. More useful at the present time than performing representations of the last war on Salisbury Plain, or even making moving pictures. Of course the pictures are wonderful for the public morale — tell Mother your pictures are useful for morale and she'll forgive you for being a romantic.'

Stubald put his forehead down on his wrists.

'I know!' he said wearily. 'But what am I to do! One of you whips me for being a romantic and the other for being an opportunist. I'll do anything you like. I'm fifty-seven. I'll go and join the Pioneer Corps if you think that's the best use I can make of myself.'

'You need a lot of guts for the Pioneer Corps,' Vaughan said.

Feeling that some interruption would not be without value, 'The crack about Salisbury Plain,' I asked with the best humour I could find, 'was that meant for me?'

'As you wish,' he said. 'That's what the army does, isn't it?'

'A great part of the time,' I replied. 'In fact, what the wartime army does is very seldom spectacular. To me that is its one attraction.'

'I believe the W.V.S. say the same thing about their branch,' he remarked. 'Mother, is there any such thing as a drink in this house?'

Charlotte turned a little, so that we saw her face in full, and in a single movement spread her shawl again so that its flow and the fall of her dressing-gown were like one chord. She had hardly moved before. She was one who could sew but who did not need her sewing, she could be perfect with her hands entirely still.

'You make me think of Lefevre,' she said to us all, ignoring Vaughan's question. 'Lefevre — she was a maid I had when I was a girl. She used so often to say, when she was doing my hair, "Ah, Madame, how hard it is to make gentlemen happy!" I could never answer her (to tell the truth, it was not a difficulty I had



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experienced then) but I think I could answer her now. It is that men can do nothing unself-consciously. You are not content to work at a job, however well it suits and absorbs you. You are always asking yourselves why you do it, pleading with everyone — and particularly with women — for reassurance. You, Mr. Oakley, your whole heart is in cinema-films. You are successful, you are famous, you give pleasure to thousands — such pleasure as they would never have from the merely commercial purveyors of entertainment. Your satisfaction, Roger, comes from rough living — an antidote to your former boredom — and I suppose partly from your pride in the mastery of guns. How contented you would both be, if you weren't always wondering whether you ought to be contented, measuring yourselves against some mythical conception of nobility.'

'And me?' Vaughan asked. 'Ought I to be contented?'

'No,' she said, 'taking your particular case, the word "contented" will not fit. But you ought to be entirely resigned. You've made, for reasons which seem — or did seem — to you of greater moral force than any others, the very choice which was most alien to all your instincts and desires. That ought to bring you the kind of satisfaction which dwarfs all the concomitant miseries. But it doesn't — it never does with any man — because you are eternally hunting for some flaw in your motives. My pride in you gives you no pleasure; it only makes you suspect that you are what they call an exhibitionist.'

Stubbald said soberly: 'You know, Mrs. Quindle, you make our position pretty hopeless.'

'No, it's you who do that,' she answered. 'But I'm wrong to blame it entirely on your sex. It is partly a disease of the time — Virginia suffers from it a good deal. I believe that if Virginia had been content with loving Edgar, instead of wondering if she loved him in the right way, things would have had a better chance to go all right. It is a season of self-questioning, an age which hankers morbidly after virtue. In my girlhood we believed in enjoyment and our belief was rewarded. We did not ask if we were enjoying ourselves in the right way, or in the correct company—which

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seems to be the main preoccupation of people nowadays. We went after pleasure and we got it.'

'Did you?' Stubbald asked.

'Of course. Only being at heart a New England puritan, like so many artists, you would never understand that.'

'And what about Father?' Vaughan asked. 'Suppose that he'd followed the career in surgery which seemed to be mapped out for him —'

'That I cannot discuss,' Charlotte said, and she turned to Stubbald again. 'You should never have left London, Mr. Oakley. (Who sent you here — Louis d'Esterland? — all Bernard's friends send each other here, it's a kind of internecine savagery.) In town people are too busy doing each other down to be quarrelsome; in the country one mauls one's friends to fill in the awful lacunæ between meals, there's nothing to amuse you between dinner and bedtime except making people miserable. Still, you will have your revenge. You will put me in your next picture, perhaps as the plainer kind of *procureuse*. I only beg that you will not reproduce this wallpaper.'

'Never fear, Mother,' Vaughan said. 'The walls, if I know anything about the cinematic art, will be lined entirely with lapis lazuli. The room will be fifty yards long, with butlers milling all over it. You will not be a *procureuse* at all, you will be a sweet old lady festooned with brocatelle, doing hemstitch across yards and yards of gingham; you'll devote most of your time to uttering simple adages about honesty which will lead your relations to buy the most rewarding shares, or occasionally dying in a highly photogenic fashion or pardoning a scapegrace grandson.'

'Mr. Oakley,' Charlotte said, 'I should much prefer to be a *procureuse*.'

My watch had begun to canter, inwardly I was smoking with impatience. My chance to catch the later bus was already thin, and it looked as if Bernard might have decided to put up at Brier-moor for the night; in darkness it would be risky to come across those hills, to which the mist would hold like a wet chemise. Yet I could not find the impetus to cut my losses and go. This

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might be the last time I should be in Orchilly. (Always, always that possibility: this night, when I got back to camp, someone might greet me with 'Heard the news, Sarge?') And I did not want to remember it like this. This evening the enchantment had failed. The wood fire was there, and the dogs snoring; the smell of dust and worn leather was joined by a whiff from the kitchen, where hams always hung, and in every patch of silence you heard the scuttling gait of the Pudsey clock in the hall. But as in my chambers, the day when I had taken my wife there and she so briskly admired my odds and ends, the familiarities had become aloof, no longer growing together.

I was actually on my feet, and coated, when he came. He had entered the hall so quietly that none of us heard him; we suddenly realized that he was in the room, with the stable lantern and a case of doctor's tools in his hands, his eyes puckered in defence against the gaslight. He was leaning against the sideboard; and the colour of his face, with the way his lips were sewn, told me everything about his legs.

'Why, *chère-aimée*!' he said, as his eyes mastered the light, and he went over to her chair hardly limping and kissed her cheek. 'But this is delicious! And Roger! Roger, I'm so terribly sorry — I couldn't get away — I had to clean the place a bit, old Sarah Eppring is too blind to do anything properly.'

Vaughan wanted to collect some food for him, but he wouldn't allow so much disturbance. He sat on the floor by Charlotte's legs, still wearing his old green hat, and stretched one hand to rest on Vaughan's foot.

'Poor things!' he said. 'But so wickedly funny it was, old Sarah trying to find out what I was going to touch her for the job. She kept telling me that Mr. Craythorne had put in for five-and-six for mending the leg of a little she-ass they had, which was shamefully dear, they thought, while Mr. Barnes had only asked eight-and-six for delivering their hired cow-girl of a bastard. I think she fancied I should quote for Hosea's leg at something between the two figures. But then of course Hosea was a bit on his dignity, and felt that his leg ought to be on a higher plane of surgical costs

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than a farm-hand's confinement, and Sarah countered that by saying the little she-ass had broken her leg in two places and "yon Epprigg," as she calls Hosea, had only broken his in one. It became highly confusing.'

'And what did you charge them?' Stubbald asked.

'I came away with some cuttings — really rather good ones. You see' — he said to me — 'this horrible man thinks of nothing but money. He would put up a super-cinema over there, bang in the middle of Chapman's grazing, if he thought he could make twopence-halfpenny out of the crime.'

'And this dunderhead,' said Stubbald urbanely, 'would not give a crust to a starving child if he thought there was the faintest risk of the child paying for it.'

The solemnity of Stubbald's face as he delivered this counterblast, the old-maidish gesture with spectacles held between two fingers, set Vaughan in laughter. That laugh of Vaughan's, which always came unexpectedly, was like the tumble of fast-following seas on shingle, the shock and breadth of it would have purged the Marshalsea. It started an echo in Stubbald himself, and then Charlotte, a little self-consciously, was laughing. Aileen came in just then, red-faced and content from some job she'd been doing, and squeezed herself between Stubbald and me on the sofa. It is a wisp of experience I shall keep for some time, I believe: Bernard on the floor there, chattering (in part to cover his rheumatic pain) about Sarah Epprigg's little ass; and the strange smile on Charlotte's face, while the sofa shuddered with the pangs of Stubbald's broodingnagian laughter.

I missed the last bus, of course, and had to walk the whole way back, arriving exactly ninety minutes after I was due to parade with the Guard. So that I appeared next day in front of the spotty little party who was running the Battery at that time, and subsequently before the C.O. He, with the usual rep, issued a delineation of my moral structure which was critical and robust. It was not a stiff bill to pay for what the extra hour at Orchilly had got me.

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### 8

WITH places as with people, you forget the names while you remember everything else. I have clean forgotten what the village was called where our camp was at that time. Yet I see the shape of it almost as in photograph.

Partly, I suppose, from that phenomenon in memory whereby the focused light spills over to the time on both sides. You will recall for months a foolish remark that the man beside you made a minute or two before the shell burst. Unexpectedly you have a serious quarrel, and your recollection of it will include what she and you did through half a tranquil day before your tongues began to lash. So it is that I have retained the last few days before the privilege leave I spent at Orchilly; days when a fractious gale brought hail and sleet in turn, when we were bored to the boundary of dementia by training which had no direction and the N.A.A.F.I. twice ran out of cigarettes. Our feelings were somewhat those of children dressed for a party, when one cab after another comes round the corner and none of them stops. We performed the gun-drill we could have done in our sleep, we cleaned the pieces and went on schemes, we enacted those minor infantry nonsenses which it is thought proper for a gunner to comprehend. 'For half a tanner,' Harry Borden repeated, 'I'd desert the fuming army and join the fuming war.'

The reaction of authority to boredom is the invention of small annoyances. They fussed about our underclothes and the way we patched them, they lined us up in the draughtiest hut they could find to be questioned by a half-baked youth from Angus who was taken for an expert in 'occupational psychology.' We filled up forms to state once more who our next-of-kin was, to apply for transfer to the parachutists or to R.E.M.E. They vaccinated us with a serum they hadn't thought of before; they made us listen to potted versions of how the newspapers thought the war was going, to a vile soprano from Windermere and the Army Act and

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the warning about V.D. Nothing of that differed much from what had happened in previous depressions. Yet the picture from those few days is stereoscopically sharp: the squalor and flat beer of the sergeants' mess, a lunatic wind careering through gimcrack latrines; never a moment free of the smell from an incinerator which the R.E. were always going to see to; of the eldritch whimper from some sieve-lunged clod who was learning, he imagined, to play the bugle.

Insufferable days; but I had, tucked into my A.B.64, the card that Charlotte had sent to answer mine: 'Come by all means. Every Victorian inconvenience. Blood, sweat and tears.' So the misery of that week, the last before the weather turned, is background for the tranquillity which followed it; as photographers in my childhood would take their sitters, in sofas and dumb serenity, against a drop which showed the heavens in unlikely rage.

Tranquillity? You must take the word as my private label. Certainly there was no idleness for the body there.

To be a casual visitor, and to be what hotels call a 'resident,' were different things. No one, when you stayed there, asked you to work. You worked most of the day (I mean you did odd jobs) simply because work was the frame of that life, as in wealthier households sleep and meals are. It had not occurred to me that a house, not over-large and with a number of its rooms unused and empty, would need much maintenance. The handful of stock, with the few acres which Bernard had under cultivation, were scarcely enough to be called a farm. Yet however early you woke you heard someone moving about the stable-yard, and there were few moments between then and evening when we all sat down together. They say that in parts of Wales the travellers, when they miss a local train, will pursue it closely on foot from station to station. The shape of living at Orchilly was rather like that. The work was always just beyond management and everyone doggedly chased it, always believing that one day the thing would slow down and let the pursuers catch up.

For the greater part I chose the domestic jobs. They were generally more fool-proof than the work of the farm, and more in

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need of doing, since Charlotte could not be on her feet and Aileen, in the time that Shalce and Kiss-Chick didn't occupy, preferred to work outside. I made the pumping my own chore; it was not a light one, with a leaky old pump of the single-movement kind to raise the water some sixty feet. I tended the gas-plant, and cleaned the lamps for those rooms which the gas-pipes didn't reach. The boots, naturally, came to me, and the scrubbing of the kitchen tiles. I also took over Shalce's washing; priggishly, because Aileen said a man couldn't cope with such things. With Aileen I shared the bed-making (enjoying her jokes of the ample Deptford kind), I did a great deal of the cooking when Bernard was elsewhere. In moments when you outstripped such labours of routine you went about the house with a biscuit-tin full of tools, re-tacking some linoleum which was tripping people on the landing, fixing a baluster or oiling a squeaky hinge.

The pleasure that I (a congenital idler) found in such occupation came not entirely from its novelty; for the difference between the toilets of a gas-plant and of a 25-pounder is one of mere detail, all machinery presenting equally what has been called 'dumb insolence.' Neither was I enjoying only the zest of being no man's servant, which comes to you on every leave. It was rather that in doing what the others did I acquired my patent of membership. You are not part-owner of a house until you have scrubbed its floors. You achieve a status higher than the visitor's when the potatoes at lunch are those you have dug and peeled. And only when I had spent most of a morning putting Shalce's small clothes through the wringer did I feel justified in regarding myself as a godparent to that grubby, triste, and rather endearing child. I was, of course, ham-handed. I improved as the week went on, but never reached the speed of the others, who did things with that silence and intuition which belong to the crew of a racing yacht. You began to wash a mountain of dinner-things when no one was anywhere about. You were not a quarter through when you found the pile on the draining-board had begun to dwindle—Bernard or Aileen was behind you furiously drying. I left, carelessly, a pair of trousers on the bed in my room, with a hole in the seat: within an

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hour someone had whipped them away to Charlotte, who made the sewing her part of the household business, and by the evening I found them expertly patched.

Sometimes it was Kiss-Chick who helped me; for he was about again, though in feeble case. What he liked most was to work on his snack-bar cards, which he was ornamenting (disastrously but with no small skill) with painted flowers. I think that Aileen, in her rough but not heartless fashion, would often drive him into the domestic arena; and as I stood over the range I would find him handling a wooden spoon (after wiping it on his cuff) or taking one of my utensils and very slowly cleaning it. Cooking was one of the things he understood, but in a way not much applicable to an English country kitchen. 'If only you had garlic!' he would say. 'The bull without garlic is like a young maid with no love in her heart.' Or, 'You would prefer to broil it, Serjeant-Mister, I think, yes. That I would explain, would only I could have here the little stove I had at Mlava Prasnish.' And he began sadly to get out the things for the dinner-tray, one fork at a time, telling me of meals he had served in the Europejski Hotel, of the artists who had come to his table, of the Café Franz-Josef in Buda and how Einstein had sat there half the night talking with Otto Zarek of music and of Goethe. 'That was a hard life I lived then. Work much hard. But always you have music and talk, people are angry about the paintings of Poussin, about love and poetry and God. But now — over there — all gone! No one is angry any more about anything that matters. The German soldier makes hold of the beautiful vase, and so quick as that — all the flowers have died.'

The window of the room I had looked east, and the early sun came right on to my bed. That, with the hubbub of many birds, roused me, and at once I was fully awake. For a few minutes I lay motionless, tasting reflectively the several pleasures of that experience: of having my body warm and still, my head clear from any disorder of yesterday or anxiety for the hours to come; of smelling the sweet and chilly air which sponged across my forehead; watching between the new-fledged boughs the ineffable light which coursed across the Nelden greens. So different, there, was the shape



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and fit of all sensations, I did not need the usual cigarette for courage to break loose from bed; it cost no more than the effort to vault a gate. I shaved, as Bernard did, in the kitchen, where hot water was at hand and where we could pass the time of day; and dressed, in my own room, with the window wide open, taking the flick of frost in the air with its velvet richness. The milking was finished; Bernard with Aileen's help did that before he shaved. My first job, as a rule, was to bring the milk across to the huge larder which served as dairy, and to carry out fodder for the pigs; or if Aileen had done these things already (for there were muscle and speed in her flimsy-looking body and she liked to be always ahead) I got on to the pumping straight away, taking Shalce, who rejoiced to watch me. The pump, with a clumsy roof of corrugated iron, was between the farther cart-shed and the orchard. You had there faintly the cows' smell, and keenly that of wakened soil; sometimes, from the house, the smell of smoke and of bacon frying. In that quick air noises came vividly: the clatter of Aileen's tempestuous labours, the sound of old Curtewn chattering to the sheep a quarter of a mile away. And it seemed to me that these disturbances were in harmony with the morning's calm.

It was in the scheme to get as many jobs as possible done before breakfast; you felt, so, that you were cheating time. You breakfasted when your hunger for food grew stronger than your appetite for the morning sun: you took a dollop of porridge from the saucepan, fried yourself any egg or rasher that was going and carried them into the dining-room, where Kiss-Chick, painfully, would have nursed the fire to splendour. You talked with your mouth full to anyone who chanced to coincide, about Charlotte's health to-day and the poultry's, about some new evidence of Shalce's precocity: the papers never came before afternoon, so you were free at this hour from the world's misfortune. I ate vastly, and at a sturdy pace.

As soon as I was done the maturing sunlight drew me out of doors again, and I would take a shopping list from Bernard, with a rusty bicycle, and pedal off to get twine and baking-powder and candles from Lower Fall Cross.

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Our morning stretched to more than five hours; for we lunched at about two (if the opinion of the hall clock had any foundation) or a little earlier if Charlotte had decided to come down. But that time travelled as, in less headlong houses, it passes late at night. Again you were intent on how much could be finished, till hunger came on you unawares and with it the new delight of surrender and a measure of rest.

If, in the morning, I had worked nimbly, and without too many pauses, I felt justified after lunch in giving myself a wider range. On the far side of the turnip field there was a ditch that wanted clearing; a muscle-twisting job, which covered a clumsy workman from head to foot with rank slime, but one to pay me well with satisfaction in the clean-cut walls, the cheerful escape of water long trapped in mud. It was better still to climb with Bernard to Chat Crag, some three miles westerly, where he had bought the fell of a small copse for firewood and fencing. There we worked mostly with a double-saw; and when you have got used to your blisters the motion of a double-saw is as pleasant as any rhythm I have found. The snowfall of sawdust on to the heap will keep you heartened till the triumphant moment when the timber hiccoughs and falls apart; and the smell of resinous wood as the saw bites it will join these rivulets of satisfaction in one stream of contentment. We did not talk much, even between the cuts; we grinned, recovering breath and letting our muscles fall loose; and while we actually sawed my mind coursed so freely that it could turn and see, like a man watching a child at play, my own enjoyment. When we had done our afternoon's stint we sleighed the cut wood down to the track, where Curtewn would come tomorrow to pick it up with the shandrydan. That was an awkward job, and damnably painful, for the sled contrived to charge your ankles and as you laboured to control it the little, thorny branches of the hillside scrub would scourge your face. More than once I fell face<sup>a</sup>down among the rocks and mud; and got up to find Bernard in a paralysis of heartless laughter. Had I been alone, at the end of such an afternoon's work, I should have gone by the lane to Lower Fall Cross and waited there for a bus; for no soldier-

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ng that I had done could search my physical resources as the Orchilly routine did. But as he, in the fetters of arthritis, turned to trudge at his steady pace over Grittis Fell, I could only follow; and taste again, when the Orchilly chimneys showed, the sense of high well-being which is got from your body answering to the spur.

Generally there were visitors at tea; soldiers or airmen from the camps near by, a don on a walking-tour, someone from that heterogeneous multitude whose friends or friends' friends had known the Quindles on voyage or in London. So that meal, north-country in size and connotation, had a conversational flavour of its own. I sat to it very tired and thirsty, content to listen to the chatter of strangers, lacking at first the energy to join in. But few were silent for long at that table, and I had presently, from the comfort of my relaxed body, a swollen conceit of my own ability as a talker. These travellers landing on our island roused us all to such efforts as you seldom make within the family circle, so that even Kiss-Chick, finding a gap, would address the company in hard-wrought phrases; and they enlarged our horizon, letting us see against fire-lit walls and beeches falling into twilight the clouded uproar of King's Cross and the gridded streets of an Alberta township, listless shapes along the distempered sides of the out-patients' department, men weeping from hysteria in trucks which limped on African roads and tired men arguing through the small-hours in the stale air of Commons committee-rooms. I had been, so to say, on the outer side of this hospitality. Now, on the inner side, I believe I valued it more keenly. And the guests were an excuse for dawdling; sometimes we did not even clear the table till the last of them had gone.

There was housework waiting again, and jobs about the farm; lamps to be lit and windows shielded, Shalce to be put to bed. But in this stretch we moved more leisurely, and when anyone had done his share he had time to read or to write letters. In this time Kiss-Chick laboured upon his cards, and Bernard at his Cantonese translation of Bunyan; peculiarly, he could do this work at any corner of the table, while Aileen used the rest for ironing or rattled

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the sewing machine; he could make himself quite deaf to our chatter and laughing. This occupation went on until, at ten or thereabouts, someone uttered the formula 'Nobody hungry?' and it was understood that he or she would then get supper; which was a picnic affair of the day's remains reinforced with soup or cheese. Supper was followed by evening prayers, an archaic custom which I did not find disagreeable, and then, in theory, it was time for bed. It was, at least, unwritten law that the fire should not be made up again; but I took good care, if no one else remembered, to stoke it generously before then.

For it was understood from usage that we all lingered; and that hour, the best of all, was for me the day's climax, the one to which, through all its immediate pleasure, my spirit continually stretched forward. To the dull, pleasant ache of tired muscles, the subdued smarting of scratched hands, there was added now a drowsiness which, belonging to the moorland air, could be satisfied for a time with something short of sleep: I had in those few minutes the semblance of sleep's blessedness with a conscious mind to enjoy it. We did not laugh much then, or scramble for an opening in the chatter; our ears were tuned to each other's slithering voices, which against the little sounds of night, the creak and whimper of an elderly house, were like shadows passing on a roughcast wall. The gaslight had begun to fail; our faces, bright for an instant when a piece of firewood fell and flared, were on pillows of shade. In this half-darkness the room's worn poverty was lost, and the poverty of our clothes. With eyes half-shut I saw only the others' faces and hands, their structure defined like rocks that show when the tide recedes; very close, and gentle from their stillness.

How small Bernard looked, sitting as he liked to do on the arm of the big chair, with his short legs hanging. How small and shabby, yet gigantic with the years and voyage that his eyes held. How still, like a jungle creature in a narrow cage. He would wait for us to talk, saying only, 'I don't feel perfectly sure . . . But there is another side . . .' or if the field were empty for his voice he would talk himself, letting the sheathed words flow to the fire, only throwing a timid glance to see if he wearied us.

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'That tool that hangs on the stairs, it's a miner's pick, I keep it there to mortify my spirit if ever I feel proud of a day's work. My grandfather started to use that pick when he was thirteen. At Bolsover — Bozer, as they call it. He was working on the coal-face for fifty-three years, and in all that time, he told me, there were less than a dozen days outside Sundays when he didn't go underground. I think he was a remarkable man, though I suppose I shouldn't say so. He learnt to read when he was sixty — he made one of his granddaughters teach him. And that same year he gave two hundred pounds from his savings to a new chapel they were building. . . . My father? Oh, he was quite different; a much quieter man, and he went into "gentleman's service," in spite of Grandfather's wish to put him in the pit. A very good servant he was, between ourselves. I don't feel, you know, that's it altogether right to give as much of body and heart as he did to serving a single family, when all the world's millions are desperate for our service. Still, that was his choice, and he never interfered with mine, though he thought that doctoring was a fancy trade which you ought to leave to rich men's sons . . . Aileen, you're nearly asleep, child! I'll manage the milking myself to-morrow, you must have an extra hour in bed.'

We performed a routine of locking up; 'as precaution,' in Bernard's unkind phrase, 'against the licentiousness of the Royal Artillery.' We took our lamps from the kitchen dresser and processed up the back stairs; on the servants' landing, sleepily, we said Goodnight. I made my way through the several empty rooms which led to my own and put my lamp, for the realm's safety, where its light would penetrate only feebly the tenuous curtain; mechanically pulled off my clothes and pitched them on the ottoman which was nearly all the furniture the room contained. The double bed lacked all but one of the brass finials, two of the castors were gone and most of the springs; within this vast and ruinous monument of Victorian repose I found a diagonal hollow which, when I had packed myself in soldier-fashion with my great-coat and the motley blankets, gave me greater comfort than most of the beds I have used in war or peace. In this serenity I tried for a while

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to keep myself above the surface of oblivion; but slackly, as a child tries to hold a sweet in his mouth until it has melted away. Once or twice I kept awake, for perhaps five minutes, ecstatically held in the grip of somnolence, listening to the flecked quietness of the lonely night. Once, through the closing curtains of sleep, I thought I heard voices from Charlotte's room; hers strangely querulous with Bernard's slow and patient; but already I had sunk too far to be disturbed by those. In most of those nights I seemed to pass at once from the first warm and dark contentment into the new glory of morning; as lovers pass from expectation to the tender aftermath of their fulfilment.

## 9

It was on the Tuesday, I think, that Virginia came. She had sent no word ahead. She walked in her London shoes from Cernwith Station, which she had reached by the night train, leaving her baggage for Curtewyn to fetch. I was washing out a swill-tub, which had got to stink insufferably, when her tired, bustling voice started like a small detonation behind me.

'Roger, I wish you'd help me move some furniture. I can do it by myself but it takes three times as long.'

I nodded, rinsed my hands under the cock of the rain-water butt and followed her up the servants' stairs. Her jejune greeting had pleased me: it was of the sisterly shape, and sisters are a class too little valued. She said, as we made our passage through the linking rooms, 'If I don't get myself fixed up in the corner-room Father will make me take his again. And it's the worst thing for his arthritis, sleeping in a damp room.'

I said, 'If I've been put in your room, I'll shift. I've not got it clear which —'

'No, no,' she said, 'I've no particular room. We all move about

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according to the current population. The only thing is that Mother must have her room, because she can't live in dowdy surroundings. And Father must be somewhere dry, and there aren't as many as three dry rooms in this insensate edifice. Oh, and if Roy Mottessmore comes we always clear the apples out of the end room. There's only one thing worse for his asthma than flaking distemper, and that's the smell of apples. All geniuses have some kind of infantile fad like that.'

I could see she had not slept much; and I learnt later that she had travelled the whole way from London in the corridor. But as we dismantled a rusty bedstead, as we worked a vast, trumpery wardrobe through doorways contrived to defeat such manoeuvre, she talked with a continuous metallic vivacity. Had I heard of the experiments which Krapiterik was making at Yale to show that animals devise their own economic laws? What did I think of Max Wiener's pamphlet on separation allowances? She was taking a week's holiday, she told me, on the advice of her doctor. 'Not that I believe half what the man says. His prescriptions are twenty per cent science and eighty per cent what he thinks he can sell the patient. Still, it's just as well to let Jill Maudreen run the job by herself for a bit. The only initiative she ever shows is to say that I'm all wrong. Well, she can try her way for a change — which means trying to please the Board and nothing else.'

I said: 'I don't really know what sort of job it is.'

'I run a hostel for juvenile workers,' she said tersely. 'I don't mean that I pay for it — it's paid for by a clutch of reactionary old gentlemen. They're much more difficult to run than the juveniles. Well, it's something to occupy one's mind; otherwise I'd be thinking all the time about the war, and other things. . . . For God's sake don't put your foot through that screen, it's one of Mother's belongings.'

'Something to occupy one's mind.' That, to my thinking, was an understatement of her need. She had appeared to me a woman of remorseless energy; and now she was like one trying to escape from the pulse of her own inward turbine. I left her when we had arranged her room. In twenty minutes she was with me again in

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the kitchen, changed to her country clothes, and helping me to prepare the greens. Already she had dropped into the Orchilly routine; and not, I think, merely from habitude, but believing that this discipline too would remedy her malaise. She was gay now, in the fashion of the frightened or overtired. 'You see what comes,' she said, 'of breaking into people's houses!' And neither her chatter nor her restlessness vexed me, for I could see her as a creature supporting with a show of bravery a load beyond her power.

In fact, the energy she gave to the house did work as febrifuge. You saw that in a few hours by the change in her voice, the diminuendo of her unconscious movements. And now that she was here it seemed hard to imagine the household machinery without her, for she got through twice the work that we did, and by many small adjustments she caused the gears to mesh more evenly. Her presence meant more to me than that. As she slipped back into the tenor of Orchilly, losing the coarse rind of her metropolitan complexion, I found her vitality — even the astringency which infected much of her speech — a stimulating element in the day's texture. She could be tart and childish, but never unfriendly. She came as an evening wind comes on a day when you have lounged in the sun, you stirred yourself to answer her challenge. There was feminine vigour in her walk, in the movements of her lithe body when she assaulted the kitchen flues or stooped to sweep up the debris of food which Shalce had scattered. And she carried always a tincture of strident, over-lit hotels, agreeable reminder of a distasteful familiarity.

Above all, her coming was grateful to Bernard. Sometimes, when she was not looking his way and he did not realize that I was, I saw him regard her with troubled eyes; and when by accident I once surprised them in lonely conversation they had both an unhappy, almost I had said a furtive look. Those, however, were the exceptional times. When we were all together they were generally lively, often affectionate. She teased him shrewdly, and his voice cuffed her in return; it was like the play of a puppy with its dam, robust, and circumscribed by understanding rather than by rules.



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'Father, I saw Jesse Febes this morning. He tells me you cheated him over a cockerel.'

'Nonsense, Ginnie! I charged him twice what the bird was worth, but that isn't cheating in this part of the world. The man's got eyes, hasn't he!'

'So that's your idea of honesty!'

'Honesty, my dear, is a luxury I'm too poor to afford; as Madame l'Enclos remarked of her virtue.'

She sprang at that. 'Ah — so we become tired of poverty! You've been drilling it into me for about thirty years that money is a senseless acquisition, that only feeble-minded and resourceless people take any interest in it. And now you've been completely on the rocks for three or four years you've got sufficient appetite for the stuff to be swindling cottagers over poultry.'

'The answer to that,' he said, 'is, in the first place, that I am not on the rocks at all. Granted, I have not enough money, at this moment, to buy a new pair of boots, which I urgently require. But I still know plenty of people who would lend me money (if they had any). And secondly, Jesse has relatively much more to spare than I have. Like yourself, I am an equalitarian. I believe that poverty should be shared out evenly. Isn't that what Herr Marx was always saying?'

Virginia said austere: 'I believe that's the first time I've heard that particular argument for the exploitation of the defenceless and needy. And I shall —'

'— And now you will write a long letter to the *New Statesman* on the subject. Ginnie's defence' (he said to me) 'against all the slings and arrows of other people's fortune is a letter to the *New Statesman*. She turns towards Mr. Martin as pious Hebrews turn toward Jerusalem —'

'— Or as my father,' she retorted, 'turns towards Chungking. Shut! — don't argue with me, Sir! You know very well that that's your own funk-hole. Even here you're not far enough away from reality, you are near enough at least to read the newspapers. You can see men already devising a world fit for shareholders to live in, and you say, "Never mind! In China they do not do these

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things. In China they are philosophical and virtuous. China for me, and the devil may have what's left of England." That's your answer, isn't it!

"Philosophical and virtuous!" he repeated. "Do you think that's quite an adequate description of China — China as it has been these last five years?"

Kiss-Chick, following the chase like a lame but conscientious hound, broke in then, nodding his comprehension.

"The Chinese, yes! They are told me a very spiritual people."

"I wonder if you're right, Ivan," he said seriously. "You are right about so many things that I'm always frightened to contradict you. "*Spirituel*" — yes, I think, in a way of their own. But what do we mean in English by "spiritual"?" (The question went to Virginia and me.) "They are spiritual in the sense that they are not materialistic as Westerners are. I mean, their sense of values is far sounder. They understand the law of diminishing returns as it applies to happiness, they do not fall into the vulgar error of supposing that larger houses and faster motor-cars and softer carpets will bring you constantly nearer to contentment. But that great virtue of the mind is surely too limited, too negative, to be called "spirituality." It is surely *our* virtue — we of Europe and America — that however misguidedly we pursue a better state, however false our conception of progress, we at least, dimly apprehend that there is a better state to be pursued. The Chinese, if I have any claim to understand their mind, do not believe that at all — or only within certain narrow boundaries. They believe, at present, in the idea of fatherland. They conceive of better laws and more liberal justice. They are religious, in so far as they venerate things worthy of veneration. But essentially they are not transcendental — they do not even faintly trust what Tennyson called the larger hope."

Virginia, with the thong gone from her voice, said: "But I still don't see. The Chinese and ourselves, they both want healing. Why them, not us?"

And he replied: "Because, for the time being, Europe is sterile. In China there is heroic virtue, there are courage and inexhaustible patience, there is the impulse towards new growth. That is a soil

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in which we can replant the heritage that's withering in the West. It's no use trying to cure a sick man by the infusion of his own blood. I feel certain about that. We must give to the East what has been bequeathed to us, and in a century or two the East will give it us back.'

He said that far more haltingly than it comes from this piece of paper; with pauses in which he groped for a word, began and then changed it: he was seldom fluent in his speech, though he could fire rough sentences fast enough in a scuffle of small-talk. Whenever he spoke of China he no longer meant to entertain. He was a quiet man, not given to dogmatism or rhetoric; and when he spoke from intense conviction you felt as you would feel if an actor turned suddenly toward the audience saying, 'Listen, I agree with the words I've just spoken.' I see him now, biting his lower lip before he forms the words and staring out between us as he says, 'In China there is heroic virtue . . . I feel certain about that. . . . The East will give it back.'

Afterwards, when Virginia and I were doing a job together in the kitchen garden, she said suddenly:

'Will nothing ever alter him! Will he always be stretching and struggling to get back to China!'

Surprised by her vehemence, and answering without premeditation, I said: 'But why not? A man — unless he happens to be a dilettante like me — has got to be struggling for some object. Even if it's only another two bob a week.'

'But why focus your ambition on a place half-way round the world? Is there nobody and nothing to be mended here! Why not go for some attainable objective — that's what I don't understand.'

I thought I was beginning to understand it, but I did not tell her so; for you hurt some people easily by seeming to pretend to greater comprehension. I did not want a difference of regard to throw a shadow upon the day's quietness. We had laughed together before this. We were working along alternate rows of lettuce, stooping rather painfully; when we passed each other we got up to loosen our racked muscles and stood for a few moments, sweating and smiling. The heat you got from the job offset the wind's

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chill, the sun as I felt it then might have been September's. In these pauses we breathed deeply, taking the smell of opened soil into throat and chest. We looked, as if her eyes and mine were yoked, between the half-plumed beeches and over brilliant pasture to the tenor grey of the farthest hills, sawn out to fit the answering depth of sun-shot sky; and at each other, understanding. I did not want to spoil that sympathy.

'It can do no harm,' I said. 'He wouldn't be happy so far from the war unless he could look forward to getting back to work.'

'No harm!' she repeated; not bitterly, only with a wearied patience. 'Do you think it does Mother no harm! If he had it in him to tell her a flat lie — but then he hasn't.'

'You mean, she's afraid of being left alone when he goes back?'

'Not that,' she said. 'She knows he'd never leave her, not even if he knew for certain that she was perfectly well.'

We moved off along our separate rows. I was perplexed, wanting neither to intrude upon the privacies of a place so kind to me nor to seem indifferent. I said cautiously, as we met again, 'Do you think it's something that can be put right — your mother's illness, I mean? I had an idea it was — something of nervous origin. Of course it's not a subject —'

'You've seen her just lately?' she asked.

'She was down for lunch the day before yesterday. Oh, and I had a few minutes in her room the day before that.'

'What did you think, then?'

'I thought she got tired. Quicker than when I saw her before Christmas.'

She nodded. 'Much quicker. And that means she's ill. It's not a thing you can fake, getting tired after half an hour's conversation in just the way she does. There isn't an actress in the world who'd work out a performance just like that.' She picked up a stone and threw it, with a boy's action, at a poaching jay. 'I don't know if Father realizes. You'd think he must, being a doctor. And yet I don't know — doctors suffer more than anybody else from *idées fixes* about illnesses. He made up his mind when this trouble began that it was "of nervous origin," as you very nicely put it; and he

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half thinks it still is. Or doesn't he? You can't tell with these people who think about God all the time, they live in a country of their own.'

'Yet very near to ours,' I suggested.

'He himself is gloriously near,' she said, 'but he doesn't belong.'

Having gone so far, I was bold now. I said, 'So you believe your mother's illness has nothing imaginary about it?'

'Not now,' she answered. 'It had when it began. She was just determined that she wouldn't go back to China; she couldn't overrule his will — that will of his — in any ordinary way, so she decided to be ill. To be really ill — do you see what I mean? Well, that's a dangerous thing to do — I've seen some of my girls try it. I suppose your nurse told you — all nurses do — that if the wind changed when you were pulling a face your face would stay like that for ever. Well, that's what's happened: the wind's changed.'

I asked: 'Why doesn't she want to go back to China? Is it any special reason?'

'Because she never wanted to go there, because China to her is the token of frustration. You see, she belongs to this age rather than her own. In her time you accepted the luck of the draw and tagged after your husband, whatever he happened to be, and did your best to like it. If he went into politics you meekly became a hostess to political bores; if he was a curate you played the harmonium. Mother's not like that, she was never meek about anything. And of course he married her, in a way, under false pretences.'

'You mean — ?'

'Well, they were both very young, you know, and he was a surgeon of brilliant prospects. Yes, I think I can truthfully say that — old Sir David McAllister, who was never a gushing individual, used to tell me about the impression Father made when he took his Fellowship at Edinburgh — he was the youngest who ever qualified there. And in those days he was rather — what d'you call it? — *persona grata* in what were known as good houses. His speech must have been more provincial than it is now, but he was

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clever and modest, and he pleased people because he seemed to find them pleasing. Well, that was the sort of man she married, and the sort of life she expected — and wanted. And he decided all of a sudden that it wasn't good enough, a life of carving odd bits from the guts of millionairesses for stupendous fees. I suppose that sort of thing is always happening. It's just a pity that Mother's ideas didn't go the same way. Still, she went with him. I try not to forget that, one oughtn't to forget it. She went through with it, all those years. You haven't seen Sargant's portrait of Mother when she was nineteen? She was rather beautiful. And all the loveliness, and all the pretty dresses, went trapesing round the one-horse villages of Kansu Province. You can see how it felt to her.'

She was stooping to fiddle, as gardeners do, at the lettuce roots; I could not see her eyes, and her voice was neutral, as if she spoke of someone in whom she had no special interest. I asked:

'Do you think it would make any difference to her, now, if he promised to give up the idea of going back?'

'That's what he's asking himself all the time,' she said. 'And what's the good of anyone trying to give him an answer! It's like the question: should the captain of a liner turn her round because one of the passengers feels homesick? I can't, I simply can't help him. And you know' — this without any bitterness — 'I've got other things as well to worry over when I wake in the night. God knows,' she said, 'I've trouble enough of my own.'

Bernard was limping towards us from the house.

'Has either of you any money at all?' he called as he came near. 'I've got to get some pilchards or something if I can. Frank Eadell's just turned up, he looks like spending the night, he eats like a locust and we've practically nothing to give him.'

We went all together, slowly, towards the house.

'My dear, I must tell you,' he said, 'I've dropped another brick of outstanding dimensions. You know I could never distinguish between Frank and Lawson Colbourn when I knew them in Edinburgh. Actually it was Lawson who got married and was fruitful and multiplied. Frank became a Jesuit Father. And when I saw him just now, dressed up like a stage poacher, I said, "Well,

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Frank, how are all your girls?"' He stopped and smelt the sun-filled air appreciatively. 'I don't trust this at all. It'll all go phut, we shall get heavy snow and it'll be the devil for the lambs.'

I said, 'Leave me to get the pilchards.'

'And I must go and make up a bed for him somewhere,' Virginia said.

But when I had got the bicycle out from the barn they were still in the garden, arm-in-arm, talking and laughing. He might be right about the snow; as a townsman I had always supposed that the day's weather came fortuitously, like the fashion in women's hats. But to me the sunshine looked immutable, as Orchilly itself seemed. People would come as I did, and join their voices for a time to the place's stock; adding to its substance, but not altering its flavour: the voice to which the place was tuned was Bernard's, with Mistinguette's low bark and Shalce's twitter as undertone. The stable door would always make its peculiar whine, strips of iron roof over the pump would rattle in every wind, the smells of cattle and engine-house which mingled in the yard would be for ever the same. With mudguards fluttering and pedals weirdly askew the bicycle jogged me across the yard and put my face into the wind. I turned and they waved to me, shouting with laughter. 'Be careful of that bike — it's not insured!' In the full sun they looked handsome together, her carriage so gallant in the polo shirt and corduroy trousers, he so toughly made and deeply brown; they looked impregnable, with the gaiety and fibre they shared, so quiet in happiness. I still descried no shrapnel from the world's noise and anger which could find and damage them here.

## IO

I THINK Father Eadell stayed for two nights. Or was it three? I remember him particularly by the splendour of his mansard

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stomach, and for a remark he made to me: 'These people ought to be Catholics. They are oversized, if I may be forgiven, for the Anglican twig.' His face was a ponderous assembly of disapproving curves; about once in every ten minutes, when he was in company, this edifice seemed to collapse from within, becoming a bewildered soufflé which cracked and billowed with mirth, while tears gushed from his eyes and his whole preposterous body quivered.

A collection of very energetic people will commonly induce an element of confusion; and Eadell suffered a little from the violence of our machinery. As a matter of course, almost as a reflex action, Bernard moved the things out of his room nearly as soon as he heard the hiccough of Eadell's motor-bicycle. Within a few minutes Virginia had moved out of her room, to which Eadell was subsequently directed, while Aileen carried his rucksack up to Bernard's. Virginia brought him a cup of tea and went off to deal with Shalce, who happened to be howling. Immediately afterwards Kiss-Chick, from his own courtesy and tenderness, brought a porringer of soup and stayed to watch him drink it. He had come without pyjamas, as such people always do. Virginia sent Kiss-Chick to borrow a pair of Bernard's, Kiss-Chick misunderstanding her direction borrowed a pair of hers and put them in his room; so that when he came down to the kitchen to shave next morning he gave us a spectacle of some indignity. He was near-sighted, and plagued with corns. He did his best, in a confused and helpless fashion, to take his share of domestic activity, but had never a chance to make headway. Virginia, bursting upon him as he fumbled to make his bed, and remembering some innocent remark he had made at lunch, would lecture him in her Gollancz manner for five minutes without a pause and flash away to the stables. Shalce, who loved him, took to waylaying him in the hall and dragging him by the trouser-leg into Kiss-Chick's 'studio'; where Kiss-Chick would maintain, with tortuous eloquence, that Cracow was the only true repository of the Catholic Faith. In these capricious seas the old priest floated unsteadily but with unchangeable good-humour. You would find him in the dining-room with a broom and a frying-pan in his hands (Aileen, I suppose, had told



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him to fetch her a brush and pan); he would stand there waiting hopelessly for Aileen to reappear, the whole world's misery and shame appearing to enshroud his face; till suddenly the situation overcame him, his lips rolled out like a baby's who starts to cry, the devil of absurdity seized him and he turned into a shuddering hillock of laughter.

That was perhaps the common denominator of all those varied people who had once known Bernard — in London, in steamers, or merely by correspondence over books — and who drifted to Orchilly as to a confluence of ocean currents: they set the value he did upon the ridiculous, in whatever form it came; not least when they found it in their mirrors.

I might never have learned, or not learned until much later, what sort of man Virginia's husband was had Eadell not been there; his harmlessness made people expansive. I found him with Charlotte one afternoon when I took up her tea; she liked his company and her room must have been for him a grateful asylum. He was undergoing a prolonged bout of laughter, as in her low and level voice, a little fainter now than when I had first heard it, she described Virginia's wedding.

'... I began to think that mismanagement could be raised very nearly to the level of an art. You can picture Bernard, just home on furlough, in my six-foot brother's morning clothes. But can you see him and Virginia in her bridal array going on foot from Curzon Street and across Piccadilly to St. James's, while the carriage Bernard had ordered was waiting at some completely different address? And of course the poor dear couldn't get himself clear about the *dramatis personæ*, there were so many of them and he'd hardly seen them before. He thought Virginia's father-in-law was someone from the Press — which was certainly what he looked like — and he took him into a corner and said, "For heaven's sake, man, don't put a snobby list of these ghastly presents in your deplorable rag," which was unfortunate, because Timothy Aulcheter had a controlling interest in De Vester Publications at that time. Yes, nearly everything went wrong. The lift at the hotel got stuck with all the most important guests in it. The place was

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crawling with police because there'd been a suicide the night before, and all the sandwiches tasted of Vim. The most entirely insane of all Virginia's in-laws — old Lady Enstifawn — imagined she'd come for a christening. She kept running up to Ginnie and saying, "I do so long to see your lovely baby!" until a rather undistinguished cousin of Bernard's told her she was a bawdy old trollop. That was unpopular, because Hilda Enstifawn was president of half a dozen of those societies which try to interest people in chastity. It was altogether an awkward party to handle.'

'How I should have enjoyed it!' Eadell said presently. 'I enjoy every moment of any wedding I have anything to do with.'

'Yes,' said Charlotte, 'it must be a pleasant thing to witness from the terra firma of celibacy.'

'As a celibate,' he answered, 'and with due deference to St. Paul's rather drastic opinion, I still believe that marriage is one of the highest glories to be attained by human kind.'

'And you, Roger,' she asked nimbly, 'do you think that?'

I said, 'I suppose it can be.'

'In essence,' Eadell said, 'I believe that it is. Even marriage between people who are poorly matched. Just as great drama will ennoble the most wretched actors — until they try to cheat each other.'

'And then?' I asked.

'Then they must start the play again, submitting to sincerity.'

'Or a different play,' Charlotte said.

'No, I don't think so.'

He was staring at his stomach with a faint smile, amused and slightly incredulous, like those who look at pelicans.

'Whatever you tell me,' he said reflectively, 'I'm certain that Virginia looked wonderful in her bridal dress. I wish I'd seen it. Was her bridegroom tall? He should have been.'

'Only an inch taller than her,' Charlotte said, turning into the one highroad of maternal accuracy. 'But they looked very well together, even in the photographs. Yes, Edgar was quite a handsome creature till he got fat. Not that I dislike stoutness,' she added, 'but it never suited Edgar.'

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On the verge of a new collapse, Eadell nodded austere. 'It's a privilege which should be reserved for the Church,' he said. 'But probably your son-in-law's not to blame. I expect Virginia feeds him much too well.'

It may be that I only imagined it; but I thought I saw him turn his head, as he said that, just far enough to look sidelong at her face.

Charlotte shrugged her shoulders. She had rather the air of one who throws a note across the market stall, bored with bargaining.

'Not lately,' she said. 'She hasn't been with him for eleven years.'

I began in a hurry to talk about the sandwiches: Aileen always wanted to cut the crusts off, Virginia thought that Charlotte liked them, and so on. But she broke out from that simplicity as Samson tore the green withs. As if we had challenged her, she said: 'Was it really my fault! I know I advised Virginia to accept him, I'm not denying that. But how could I know! — I was in China, I never saw him till a fortnight before they were married, and you can't upset things at that stage. I knew all about his family, it seemed very suitable. She'd had a disastrous affair with a French sculptor, I didn't want that sort of thing happening again and again. From all I heard he seemed to be very much devoted to her, I had charming letters from his mother.'

'And what was wrong?' Eadell asked deliberately.

'Nothing. Except that their tastes proved to be different. He liked country life, he was a good shot and all that sort of thing. When he came to London, his ideas of amusement were rather conventional, he liked to stay at Claridge's and go to musical plays of the tra-la-la order. He thought that Art meant the Private View day at Burlington House. But there wasn't any vice in him, unless you call it a vice to get your money from iron foundries, as Virginia evidently thinks it is. These things are not so simple as they seem, I've had some experience — I mean, I have seen a number of marriages. If deliberate cruelty and infidelity and things like that were the only rocks for a marriage to founder on, the shore would not be so littered with wreckage. There are smaller and more

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subtle things that can start a leak. No, Father Eadell, I doubt if marriage is very often the house of enchantment that you believe.'

He smiled. He said with courtesy: 'But you know, I didn't call it that. I called it glorious. A man sweating in a quarry is glorious, but there's no enchantment about him.' He was looking at her frankly now, his smile had altered. 'I often wonder,' he said, 'if it would not be a good thing to make people write down their thoughts upon their personal problems. When they are hurt and irritated, for example, to put on paper exactly what has vexed them; to say whether they are quite clear of blame themselves, and what steps they think of taking to put things right.'

Charlotte said, rather coolly: 'You can try that on Virginia if you like. Only —'

'But you, yourself,' he said, 'if you were to write down all your thoughts about your daughter's marriage, the sickness which has overtaken it and what you have done or could have done towards its healing. . . .

Charlotte turned to me with her friendly and capable smile.

'If you would be a dear, Roger, and get me that other cushion from over there. My back gets tired.'

And Eadell got up to go.

Her request was not mere artifice. I saw in the colour of her fingers, in a little alteration of her breathing, signs which I had learnt in these few days to recognize. They came suddenly, these changes; as to a sprinter who one moment is a brilliant engine and the next a panting body on the grass. She had overreached her power, and was in pain now: the way her mouth was shaped told me that.

I said, directly Eadell had gone, 'You'd like to get to bed — I'll fetch Virginia, shall I?'

She whispered: 'No no! I won't be the horizontal kind of invalid, not till I must.' And then, rather pitying than vexed, 'He thinks he understands all about us. And half of it he doesn't even know.'

I arranged the cushions for her as well as I could — Bernard always did it so much better — and made up the fire.

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'At least you don't plague me, Roger!' she said. 'I don't see why people can't take a woman as they find her. One does one's best to be pleasant. Why do they try to follow you into the wings!'

As I went downstairs I came upon Eadell again. He was waiting on the half-landing, and he caught me by the arm.

'I'm sorry,' he said, 'truly I'm sorry! It wasn't fair to you, it made you most uncomfortable.'

I said: 'I can stand a certain amount of discomfort.' And with a slice of patronage, 'But I think you shouldn't see her again — not to-day. She tires very easily.'

'Very easily, you're right.' He was looking straight at my face. When he was quite close, like this, he did not have to strain his eyes; you saw only then the energy within their quietness.

'In one way I'm glad. It proves that it's real. I should hate to know it was all chimera, to think that Bernard suffers as he does for nothing.'

We went on downstairs and through the back lobby into the garden.

'You think I'm very unchivalrous,' he said, 'and very unkind. But I can't be any use to people until I've found them to be honest. I simply had to know where Charlotte Quindle stands in this business, and what part she's played. Yes, I know I exhausted her, and I know she's an invalid. But there comes a time when people have got to examine themselves. God won't wait for ever.'

'But does it really matter,' I asked, 'what sort of a man Virginia's husband is, and what Charlotte ever thought of him? Surely that's all in the past?'

He said: 'It matters a good deal, since he lost both his arms in France, and now that he wants Virginia back.'

## INTERIM

### II

Yes, I know now it was three nights that Eadell spent with us. I remember for some reason that he came on a Friday, and he was with Bernard and me when we went to Dubbledale on the Sunday evening. Holding a Bishop's licence, Bernard went occasionally to take Evensong there. Eadell said he would like to stretch his legs, and 'I can occupy myself in the local ale-house while you direct the local apostates.'

'Your legs will be adequately stretched,' Bernard said.

The road goes through Isaiah's Drinkle, and the Ordnance Surveyors, with their egregious breadth of mind, have coloured it as second-class. I found it first when we traversed it in convoy, cursing its awkward dips and turns and the cottages which leaned across it at the sharpest corners: a tedious twenty minutes of clouding dust and jactitation and incessant change of gears. A scrabble of wide ruts was left on the verge where our quads had been slackly steered, here and there the banks were breached; but the dust had settled, the reek and rattle were long absorbed in the sanitary tides of wind. Curious, the diverse records that the same pair of eyes will make. I had noted the route carefully, matching ground to map, on the chance that I might have to pick it up by night. So the aspects were familiar, the very shape of the buildings had stayed on my mind's plate as solid pointers for a doubtful fork or obscure turn. But those pictures were like passport photographs in their likeness to what I saw this evening. A white cottage, which had merely shown itself more trim than its neighbours, was revealed now as a Georgian manor in perfect miniature. The granary beside Wisk Fall was no longer a rectangle of stone but a work of faultless grace in the fit of height to length, in the pitch of its stone roof, an artist's narrowing of the muscular steps which rose to the attic door. I had remarked a little bridge to have in mind that the road went over the Toin there; I had never seen how sensitively its parapets were curved. And the half-wit urchins who

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had darted in front of our wheels had grown through a month or two into fair and smiling images of God.

A road's excellence lies in its power to yield the unexpected; and this lane concealed its riches until you were right upon them. It took you for half a mile as straight and respectably as the lanes of Lincolnshire, you thought you could see ahead how it would curve to manage the rising ground. Then, when it had bent a little, it dodged abruptly to avoid a house that stood in its way and became immediately the high road of a village. I do not know if it has a name, this place; 'yonder over edge' was how I had heard it called, as if the world ended there; it was a rhombic green, shaved close by goats and fenced with beeches, on which a dozen cottages stood at independent angles like children at the beginning of a party. Instead of taking the obvious course the lane suddenly wheeled right again and squeezed between two granaries. You were in a beechwood now, where the breeze was oddly stilled and the day seemed to have strode forward into evening. And now, as the road dipped sharply, the fence of brush gave place to rock, you smelt and heard the flow of water over rock before you found it running beside you. For perhaps twelve minutes, at our pace, the lane tried to edge away from the beck; but the wall of rock, now sloped to carry little oaks, now mostly bare and vertical, would nudge it in again; until, squeezed hard by the narrowing gorge, it boldly turned to step across the beck, rose in one leap upon a gentle slope it found there and broke away and up to the freedom of Pitchnose Fell. Again you had made landfall on a foreign soil. The smell of moss and the stream's rustle fell away, all the rock you saw was the giant boulders that lay dry amidst the broom. Like small beasts born prisoner we had been content with a prospect stretching to forty feet on either hand, with the gush and trickle of white water through hanging ferns, fragmented light on the marriage of cliff and green. We emerged in a land whose only boundary was the sky and the sky-toned hills, where the eye's convenient mark was the thrust of Skiddaw twenty miles away.

The wind here was fresh, but duller-edged than you would hope for in this season, for the sun had been clear all day to tame it.

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Strangely, it did not seem to blow from any quarter, and it stirred the bracken hardly at all; you felt its motion rather as the movement of the crowd about you watching a procession, a constant, not unfriendly pressure on all your sides. And the light was strange; pale and constant like summer evening's light reflected from a calm sea. I had thought this country had no new colours to show me, I knew the whole range of its greys, the bracken's lustre and the mournful shades of peat and dying heather. And now they came as if the eyes I used were subtler than my own, tones more translucent, more sensitively joined. About the level of the road a film of mist spread flat to the nearer hills. I saw it not as a cloud but rather as if a watered brush had been drawn across my view. Within this band the colours of moor and hill were paled, so that they seemed not Nature's but a romantic painter's reverie; and all the shades below and above, to where the sky held constant sympathy, were changed and softened to keep it in communion. Our chatter faded there, we walked beside the road and our shoes on the resilient turf were almost silent. From very far we heard an engine whistle as it scuttled into the Redknock tunnel. But that was another world, and this we saw, fastened in stillness, was a new creation for ourselves.

At Drinkle we left the road and took the bridle path which is said to save you nearly half a mile; it does, perhaps, in terms of distance. It may have been habit which sent Bernard that way; it was devilry (or I am astigmatic to human foible) which made him leave the bridle for a cut of his own over Wirrup Crag. He had led us all the way, at least a pace ahead on the flat; the shackles of rheumatism seemed to have no power against the ferocious energy with which he walked. I had run a steady second, with Eadell panting a pace or two behind, short legs and tiny feet moving like a barber's scissors to carry his vast bulk forward. And they had argued almost incessantly about the teaching of Auguste Comte.

'But the fundamental absurdity of your position is shown when you try to deal with some common evil such as spiritual pride — or priggery, if you like to call it that.'

'Now listen: suppose you detested the smell of geraniums, and,



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you decided that your mission in life was to rid humanity of that nuisance. You could, of course, set out to destroy all the geraniums in the world, or to abolish decorative horticulture, or even to murder all the world's gardeners. But if —'

'No no, I refuse to be led into a familiar and quite false analogy. Take the case of a very virtuous old woman who lives quite alone in a tenement in Glasgow —'

'Yes, but before we go to Glasgow, let us consider how positivism has been defined. You remember first of all, how Ross has described Aristotle's attitude towards "the real" . . .'

The path had become a chute of boulders and I was dripping with sweat when Bernard, as one who boards the 8.45 at Woking, took a handful of briar and hoisted himself on to a shelf of rock. I followed, and by the time I had landed there he was thirty feet higher, ploughing like a bulldozer through the gorse towards the naked scree. Eadell came after us, but his dialectic powers were stifled at last.

'Call up to him if you can,' he puffed. 'Tell him he's a muddle-headed old nannygoat.'

I did as he bade me. A voice that seemed a long way off shouted back:

'Tell that overfed papist down there that a cloven hoof is useful on the fells. And tell him it's time he read his St. Augustine with less spiritual intention and more general gumption.'

'Tell him,' Eadell panted, 'quick — before he falls over one of these damned precipices — that Augustine has more pitfalls for the purblind ignoramus than any author since Ezekiel.'

By way of a knife's-edge bridge of rock we reached the southern shoulder-blade of Wirrup and rounded it crabwise, clinging and sliding on the scree. From the other side you looked straight down into St. Bridget's tarn, shaped almost as perfectly as a church's font, and saw to your right the ladder of Seven Tarns reaching down to Clouden Mere. The wind was nettlesome here, cold with the coming nightfall, pleasant to our hot faces. In these few minutes the light had dropped in tone, and the birds' voices quieted. Towards the Clucker range the mist had formed to snowy hills

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with green lakes in between, and on the greening sky a shoal of narrow clouds had gathered to build up a floating landscape with its own soft hills and plateau and lake. So real that land seemed, and so ethereal the misted country beneath, the eye lost power to mark reality; I felt the strip of land we walked on was a vessel slumbering in unknown seas, that the seas would presently engulf it. The wind pouring in my ears strengthened this feeling of detachment; unreasonably, it increased our stillness and repose. We found Bernard waiting where a sheep-track started, he was standing against the wind as a sailor does and smelling it with an epicure's nose. He asked, as we came level, 'Did you bust a bootlace or something?' He gave Eadell the coat he had been carrying. 'Here, lad, you'd better put this on now.' And presently, as we began the descent, he stopped again. 'I find it almost intolerable,' he said gathering in his eyes the tarns and the Clucker hills with the clouds' grace and opalescence, 'to have all this when men are being burnt and torn to bits.' We slithered downwards on shallow turf, scattering the amazed sheep, came into gorse again and rejoined the bridle.

Dubbledale clings to the steep side of Cleat Rigg, its alleyways and gardens are put where nature allows them, the farms spread in the easier slopes above. Its one cartworthy street goes below it, sharing a narrow gully with a racing beck. Except for a pair of brawling dogs the street was lifeless when we came there; in the retreating light the houses looked to have shut as flowers do, fresh from the hills we were like discoverers of a place long lost from human sight. A slab of stone took us over the beck, a flight of steps wedged narrowly between two cottages brought us up to the level of the lowest roofs. There were lights in the windows here; on one side you saw a child being undressed for bed, from the other you got the smell of a ham cooking. The church, still high above us, was a pattern of black and silver planes in the horizontal light of the falling day.

'You know,' Bernard said, starting to limp remorselessly up another flight, 'I can think of nothing outside music which comes nearer to perfection than that.'

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'It is,' said Eadell, 'one of the finest morsels ever stolen from the Church.'

'At least we saved it from an eczema of pseudo-Italian baroque.'

At the sexton's cottage we were greeted by a tough, small woman, with a man's muscles in hand and arm. Chidroach was in bed with the bronchitty, she told us. She had the misfortune of a diagonal squint, she seemed to be gazing alternately at the top of the Church and down into the village. No, the church boiler had not been attended to since yesterday forenoon, she said, with sibylline relish, neither were the lamps dressed; a flock of sheep astray had chewed up a number of the prayerbooks, and the organist had broken her leg. Would Chidroach like to see Dr. Quindle? Well, to say truth, Chidroach was in a powerful humour, not caring for the fiery poultice which had been slapped on his chest by Mr. Partiquer the vet; and had sworn to break the nose of the next doctor who came inside the house.

I sigh even now when I think of Eadell's sufferings. Bernard, I suppose, would have left him out of the evening's labour; but the sexton's wife had gathered from his peculiar clothes that he was some kind of servant, it was he whom she commanded to clear up what the sheep had left in the chancel, he who caught the thong of her sarcasm when we tried to reanimate the stove. Having the will of a man and the strength of two she held the sex in small esteem. 'Well, you can help so long as you don't get in my way!' When Eadell staggered into the boiler house with a bucket he'd filled from the wrong coke-stack she seized it roughly from his hands, took it back and emptied it. Heroically, in the semi-darkness, he put a shovel-full on the fire as it began to blaze. 'If you want to put the fire out,' she said, 'you may as well use water.'

'You know, Mrs. Chidroach,' Bernard said, 'my friend here is one of the most learned men in England.' She snorted. 'You,' she said, with her eyes swivelling from heaven to hell, but apparently meaning me, 'you'd better do the lamps. Unless you're a college lad as well.'

That picture has stayed clearer than so many more important ones: the bald, distinguished Eadell, half-paralysed with exhaustion

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and mirth, trying to nourish the Protestant boiler; Mrs. Chidroach on his one side, like a tigress ready to spring; on the other Bernard pincerred between embarrassment and his palate for the absurd, muttering, 'Leave it to me, lad, for heaven's sake leave it! Go and ring the bell if it won't ruin your conscience. For heaven's sake leave this to me.' And a little afterwards Eadell, with the sly face of Naaman in the house of Rimmon, tugging awkwardly at the Protestant bell.

Of the service I remember little, for I had been detailed to play the organ and was wholly occupied by the anxieties of that employment. Only when Bernard began his sermon had I time to relax and to let my eyes wander about the miniature church; to see, among its infinite small beauties, the tablet commemorating 'Master Edward Hake who, in his Forty-Ninth Year, at God's Call, was Trampled by the Nearside Horse of the London Coach and Entered into 'Rest.' With its light from four small lamps in the nave and one in the chancel the building had a Josef Israels quality: pillars and hammer-beams emerged from a suspended lake of darkness, the faces of children shyly herded in the rearmost pews were flakes of paleness in the shadow, only within an arm-spread of the lamps were features deeply etched. There, encompassed by a trio of plump dalesmen's wives, an ox-jowled youth in the weekly anguish of collar and tie stared far ahead with his fine, Cumbrian eyes. An Australian corporal sat bolt upright like one on horseback, and as if to point the anchylosis of his face the squat couple who shared his pew had faces like butter soaking into toast. In the second pew a very small, hunched woman with a widow's bonnet sat by herself. I suppose she had passed her ninetieth year, but she did not look as if age had brought her face to this nobility: the deep and regular creasing in her forehead and the margins of her eyes, the way the shrunk, almost transparent flesh was stretched upon its frame, seemed rather the achievement of a deliberate artist than any overripeness in her body's evolution. I turned my head a little to get a sidelong view of Bernard, who stood on the lower chancel step with his knuckles wedged between chest and chin. He was smiling faintly, in the way of one recount-

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ing an adventure he has undergone some time before. He spoke as he always did, slowly, as if he would give way to anyone who wished to take the company's ear; and I noticed that a Derbyshire inflexion which one sometimes heard very faintly in his voice was near to its surface now.

'... much too difficult for me to understand. I only know that, just as the worst times I've had were those when I knew I'd hurt somebody, so the times of greatest happiness often came after somebody hurting me. Of course we can't get happiness out of all the hard things which happen to us. But he could. A secret kind of happiness, such as you get from doing a kindness which no one knows anything about. That was because he loved people so much more powerfully than we do, he put the whole of his strength into loving everyone who came his way. Some of you are mothers — do you remember nursing your first baby, and the sort of pleasure you had, all by yourself, the first time he bit you! I think it's something like that, the way in which the deepest of our loving changes pain into blessedness. Aye, I'm certain it's like that.'

A farmer who had said all the wrong responses was now stertorously asleep, his anæmic daughter still gazed with bovine fascination at the boar in the adjoining pew. But the corporal's face was of one who sees from a train window some patch of country he once found pleasure in; and on the mouth of the sexton's wife, who had dumped her little body in a rearward corner, I saw with astonishment the daybreak of a smile. It was a company which reminded me of provincial auction rooms, outmoded pieces gathered from old attics, the erroneous ardour of cottage dressmakers brought dreadfully to public view. But the measured light enclosed them in its own pattern, it found even a point of gallantry in the white of an old man's beard above the dullness of his coat, in a girl's red scarf against the shadowed stone. And the voice, now hesitant, now eager, made us a circle no less intimate than any which formed in the Orchilly dining-room. Perhaps my emotions were warmed by the closeness of the air, the heat which grew from our breathing and from the odorous lamps. I know that I

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felt myself in the very weft of these strangers, and discovered pride in feeling so, and would have kept this plot of time for ever lingering.

'... When I feel most lonely I think of his loneliness in the garden, when he knew exactly what was coming and all his friends had fallen asleep. When I feel most cowardly I think of his courage. the quiet voice speaking from the hideous frame on which they tortured him. He was a man then, we must remember, he was not just play-acting as a man. And now that he's the God we pray to, do you think he's forgotten what it felt like to go through that loneliness and terror and pain!'

At some point Eadell had stolen back into the church. I had not seen him come, I noticed suddenly the shape of his head far back in the darkness by the door. I smiled to him. But it was the pollard farm lad nearer to me who caught and answered my smile. The speaker's voice fell quieter still, it was no more public than the voice he used across the Orchilly table; but in the stillness it had won the chiselled words were like small fires that leap in a darkened countryside. Eyes which had strolled about the pews came back to rest upon his face, I had the sense of dreams in which the surge and conquest depend upon your utter stillness. From that tranquillity my own eyes turned to search for Eadell again. But the place he had sat in was empty, like a shadow at nightfall he had slipped away.

I should not find again the cottage we went to afterwards. I reached it in the moving disc of light from someone's lamp, we seemed to go up and down many steps and across the yard of a public-house. In the little, crowded room we reached, the people who had been only clothes and faces turned into individuals. The old woman from the front pew became a gay and rather flirtatious creature, the man who had slept through half the sermon was volubly persuading me to try his home-brewed beer. Yet I do not think of that evening as falling into separate parts. The smiles, the squeezing of elbows which I took part in now were rather a flowering of what had gone before; and this Bernard who was talking to a child with his mouth full while he bandaged her arm, who scolded the Australian corporal for the size of his feet, was in every

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part identical with the one who had stood on the chancel step and mastered us with his quietness. An unusual meal we had, some standing and some at the table. I ate about a quartern of Grasmere cheese, while a man in a corduroy suit told me how his uncle had died of it. The woman I took to be our hostess gave me pink blancmange in a breakfast cup, and directly afterwards I had to take potato broth from a milk-jug, using a gravy spoon.

It was not, I think, a healthy room to sleep in, as a little boy was trying to do in a truckle bed behind the sofa; for from beneath the surface-odours of onion and hot linen there rose at intervals the indubitable smell of sewage. Nor had it any kind of comfort. Edging my way between the sewing-machine and a laden piano, sitting on the arm of a broken chair and then leaning against the mangle, I thought I saw a clue to the many small infirmities discovered here; for of ten or twelve in the room there were few who did not suffer from deafness, or the pallor of some pulmonary disorder, or a nervous twitch. Yet as I saw them now, encompassed by the flow of Bernard's laughter, they were radiant with content; and I have found no group of people more generous to one who, with my total ignorance of beasts and grain, must have seemed to them not far removed from dementia. I remember the charm of a squirrel-like man who told me in hoarse whispers, continuously smiling, about the intestinal problems of a certain Mrs. Richardson; and the lovely, childlike eyes of a gaunt spinster who repeated many times, breathing chutney into my face, 'But Government can't raise dead men any road, no matter what tax they put on t' brewing, no more than sow in farrow can skippit through daisy-chain.' I was sorry when we had to go.

'I don't deserve it,' Bernard said, stealing my own thoughts, as we picked our way down to the street. 'They treat you as royalty, and what do you do for them! I'm richer than they are, my life is fifty times more amusing, I've only one son in the war and some of them have as many as five. I never stir myself to see them more than twice in a month, and yet when I go they'd give me the last loaf in the village. I like it when I'm there, all that cossetting, but I feel like a pole-cat when I come away.'

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'What else could you do?' I asked him. 'You haven't time to go there every day. And if you did, what then?'

'I could listen,' he said impatiently. 'People like to have someone from a little outside their own world listening to their misfortunes. I could abate some of their quarrels. And if I were like Virginia I should raise hell about the state they live in, I should move heaven and earth to get them at least a post-Augustan drainage system. I did that sort of thing in China, it seems ridiculous that I don't do it here.'

'England, perhaps, is your Capernaum,' Eadell said laconically. 'At any rate, you're rather advanced in years to be starting out as the British patron saint of sewage. "For God, for Harry and for Indoor Sanitation!" is a cry that must come from younger throats.'

'At least,' Bernard retorted with perversity, 'if I were not so weak-willed I should persuade some of them occasionally to change their socks.'

The mist had gathered to lie lightly on the lower crests. Elsewhere the night was clear, with the stars brilliant, and very still, so that we heard continuously the sound of waterfalls, and of approaching steps which proved to be the echo of our own. We kept together now, trudging with the tired rhythm which is almost effortless.

'I always wonder,' Eadell said, 'why you never took Anglican orders. I should have thought it was your vocation.'

And we went for a quarter of a mile, perhaps, before Bernard answered him.

'It was lack of guts,' he said. 'That's what it boils down to. I've been through very few years when I didn't have the desire for it. But I always got cold feet. It's bad enough being a doctor — people imagine a doctor can read the human body like an open book, while in fact we are only starting to understand it. And that responsibility amounts to nothing, by comparison. To go no further, I consider what sort of a man Paul of Tarsus was, and compare his faith with my own fumbling and groping: to think of wearing the uniform he did, of pretending to the same brand of



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virtue, that alone makes me chilly with fright. I simply dare not carry those insignia.'

'No one would dare to,' Eadell said quickly. 'No one, that's to say, who relied on his own credentials. You can only make such a claim through a large society; in my view, a society with special patents. No, I don't want to thrust the Church at you. I'll only say—in self-defence if you like—that I should never have been mad enough to think of priesthood if I hadn't felt the might of heritage supporting me. And there, you see, a part of the unbearable responsibility is underwritten for you. We submit to a certain discipline, we cease to ask ourselves certain questions, knowing they have long been answered for us. When you have that measure of security you can concentrate the spirit's resources.'

'But I don't know that I want any security at all. I'm not ready—it may be the devil within me—I'm not ready to give up one particle of my mind's freedom.'

'And so long as you don't—it seems to me—you'll never have any kind of spiritual peace.'

'I'm not certain that I want that, either. Life would really be no use to me without the fighting.'

Curious in sunshine, Drinkle was ghostly in the starlight. The houses crouching below the cliff were like theatre properties on a railway truck, you thought your own tired eyes had made them from the confusion of brush and rock; until you heard, closely and distinct, the chatter of a cheap clock, the voice of a child murmuring in his sleep. I remember well how the toll-house looked, with its strange weather-vane inked upon a dip in the southward hills; and the smell of waterweed like a condiment in the chilly, grateful air. That smell, and the night's cold against my face, a pleasant tiredness, are all bound in with Bernard's voice as I heard it then, his small body moving almost invisibly beside me: the voice of a man hard-pressed, with still a lap to run, a voice from the core of loneliness that all men carry.

'I wouldn't change it, no, I swear I wouldn't change it. I'd rather keep the life I've had, the whole dismal procession of failures, than the triumphant life I used to dream of having.'

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'Failures?' I said.

'And the near-successes which are so much worse than total failure. I missed being a very good doctor because I had no ultimate faith in doctoring. I've failed to be even a reputable Christian because I always doubted my own Christianity. I won a woman of beauty and power, and I've never succeeded in making her happy; it's always been a compromise between what was due to her and what my real business was. I thought I had been a sensible father, and I find my girl in desperate unhappiness. I believed I could plant in China something that would grow and seed itself; and when the weather got dirty there, and my job was only half completed, I upped-sticks and scuttled away.'

I asked him: 'Do you really believe all that was failure?'

But I did not need to put the question; for this was not the voice of a man flaunting his rags.

He answered, 'Unless you think that failure means never to start on things. That's a worse kind, I suppose.'

Eadell said: 'No one ever thinks clearly when he tries to analyse himself. I take that to be almost a truism.' His voice, when his mind worked in its own field, was flavoured with an agreeable pedantry: it was like the drawing of a good architect by the side of shaggy sketches. 'I sometimes wonder if the exercise is ever worth attempting, unaided. But what does it all amount to? That at the age of sixty or so you find unfinished a number of things you have attempted. Well, you haven't time to finish all of them. You must try to finish at least one or two, and the rest must be written off.'

'But which?' Bernard asked. 'But which?'

'Do you want my advice?'

'I don't promise to take it.'

'No one ever takes it,' Eadell said. 'Some promise to. Well, to begin with, you've got to put China out of your mind.'

'I see: just forget that I've spent nearly all my working life there.'

'No, not forget. Remember it as much as you like. Only don't be dishonest, don't make yourself wretched with the delusion that

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you are young and free enough to pick up that strand again. You're not the only doctor God has made, nor the only Christian.'

'And the thing you advise me to finish?'

'Surely it's close at hand.'

'You mean — give myself entirely to Charlotte?'

Eadell did not answer at once. He said presently: 'You can't do that. She wants something you haven't got, she wants to see colours which aren't on your palette.'

'A painter gets them by mixing the other ones.'

'You've been trying to do that for nearly forty years.'

The road, dark in the shadow of Trinwick Fell, started to rise again. I knew by the moulding of the next horizon, bare of trees; the thrust of calf and thigh felt no more arduous.

'Do you think much about Virginia?' Eadell asked.

'I doubt if there's an hour when I'm conscious and when I don't.'

'Surely that's something which has got to be settled.'

'Settled? People's lives are never settled.'

'But they come to move in a certain direction. It has to be decided whether she returns to fidelity or goes on as she's going now. That's the decision she seems to have no power to make. I couldn't help her, I'm a stranger, I belong to a communion she doesn't believe in. You're the very flesh from which she came, you have all her affection.'

'And so — ?'

'If you won't help her, no one else can.'

'I agree with that. No one can. But how do you think I should advise her?'

'Surely it's very simple. She's undertaken in the name of the Holy Trinity to be united with another being. There isn't anything ambiguous in that. Do you think she can ever be happy while all her life is a perjury!'

For a few paces, as we came to the crest, Bernard slackened his speed. I could feel, in the altering rhythm of his walk, that his rheumatic body was raising its price for such callous usage.

'No,' he said, 'I know she can't. Only I know as well what the

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thought of going back means. It means perpetual contact with somebody whose whole being she loathes. I doubt if men very often loathe a woman as a woman can loathe a man: contact day after day and night after night with a man whose body she found to be a bundle of flaccid greediness, whose mind could only dribble with selfish inanities. Well, she has guts enough to face all that. But it means giving up the work she believes in, the one thing that seems to her of infinite value because it's utterly without reward. No, Frank, it's not so damned easy as you say.'

'But I didn't say it was easy. No valuable decision is made easily. There is only one guide I can think of to personal decisions, when all the arguments seem to balance: you choose the harder course.' He turned to me. 'Would you agree with that?'

'Perhaps in theory.'

'And you?'

Bernard said: 'I think I do.'

'Then doesn't that tell you how to advise her?'

'No,' he said. 'No, it doesn't. It only tells me how to advise myself. You were perfectly right when you said that Virginia trusts me. Somehow she does. I'm in the position to make her decision for her.'

'But you won't?'

'No: I value her too much for that.' He spoke salt-throatedly, as men do when they are badly frightened; it may have come from the pain in his leg. 'There are just a few things — I've always felt — which have intrinsic value without relation to anything else. Music, of course. And a man's love for someone who's quite worthless. I put one's inmost secrecy among those things: that is the seat of liberty, within that secret chamber you see what liberty means. You are a very clever man, Frank, I don't think I know anyone who can reason more subtly than you, or with greater penetration. But even you could not explain what free will is. According to everything we know about causation the good or the evil things we do come ultimately from a planted disposition for which we've no responsibility. You can't argue out of that. And yet I know that I act with a responsibility that's all my own, I can

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penetrate (though no one else can) to the very source of my own fitful strength and my cowardice, and recognize that source as belonging only to me. That is what God gave to men with no reservation, it's a token of that equality with God which God intended, and we will tolerate no man's intention to capture it. I love Virginia very dearly, I believe I understand her as well as anyone can understand the mystery of another's genius. But I won't try to force my way into her spiritual secrecy. God alone has the right of entrance there. Surely you can see what I mean! Surely the poetry which comes from men, their kindness and their staggering bravery, deserve our worship only because men yield them from untrammelled choice. What is the use of forcing a man to virtue, as you make a lion do tricks with a ball, if you rob him of all his glory! How can God speak to an ear that's deafened with compulsive voices! I may be wrong — God knows I'm not the creature to prattle about virtue or piety. Perhaps I worship men themselves too much, instead of worshipping the God who visits them. But I see such happiness in the small and hidden triumphs, such piercing beauty in the private battle, it would feel to me a kind of sacrilege to shout my own decisions through the doors of the secret place.'

From Steward's Comb we could see the spit of light from Charlotte's room which Pigeoner the constable complained of once a week; we were still nearly half a mile from home when we heard Cleopatra's maniac barking. My hand went automatically to the latch of the orchard gate; on a darker night than this I could have found my way now without faltering, my feet knew where the path began, my head ducked by itself where a plum-tree's branch would have caught it. Bernard steered off to make his final round of the beasts. 'Take Frankie in, will you,' he called to me, 'and rub him down. Perhaps he ought to gargle as well — he's been *in partibus infidelium* much too long.' 'How sensible Torquemada was!' Eadell called back as we went in by the kitchen door.

The kitchen was point-device from the daily tidying, the range and the long row of saucepans revealed a cyclonic outburst of Aileen's energy. I remember thinking, as I saw the scrubbed table

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and the plot of gaslight in which Virginia was ironing, 'No journey would matter if they all ended in this room.' While Eadell washed his hands in the sink Virginia took me by the arm and brought me into the dining-room. 'Kiss-Chick's kept the fire up,' she said, 'sit down and I'll find you some slippers.' She told me then, in a distraught fashion, that Vaughan had turned up. 'He's upstairs with Mother. He's rather in a mood, but I expect he'll be all right in the morning. No, there's no need for you to move, I've put him in my room, Kiss-Chick's going to sleep downstairs and I'm going in with Aileen.' I thought, as she started to set the table for supper, that her temper was one I had not experienced before. And she said presently: 'I've succeeded in making up my mind. I don't know if I'm right or wrong. But it's always a comfort to have made your mind up.' She sat, with a woman's incapacity for comfort, half on a chair and half propped against the table, staring at my hands and smiling remotely. It was hard to tell whether she was happy or wretched. She said: 'People always say things at the last moment, you always hear them saying "Don't forget to write" on railway platforms. I think that's a desperate business, leaving everything till the very end. Roger dear, you won't just disappear into limbo when you go away? You will let us hear something about you? . . . What do you think Father and Frank would like to eat?'

## I.2

I TRIED, through the last day of that leave, to keep to my routine. That is one device, flimsy and superstitious, to dam the leak of treasured time. It may not end, you say, if the last round of drinks is never ordered, the retreat never blown.

In reality, a man remembers only objectively the feelings he has had a year or two before. Look at a letter you wrote only eighteen months ago: do you find it easy to identify yourself with the person

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who wrote it? Can you believe, now, that you were so nervous before the Stevensons' party, that it was you who saw life as one vast sunrise because of your First in Greats? The landscape over which I look back to those days is of a strange colour, and broken here and there with jagged features. The distance is enough to confuse the eye; the man who wears my clothes is partly a stranger to me, just as our friends are constantly our strangers. I despise this man a little for his self-pity. His morale, as the jargon is, appears to be low. Yet I recollect that men in armies are as a rule self-pitying, and given to maudlin songs, till the time comes when at once they are most to be pitied and have lost the taste for that indulgence.

I clung sentimentally to solid things, as if my evanescent happiness was incorporate in them. I dallied over the pumping, thinking, 'I shall not be doing this to-morrow.' I sat on the edge of my bed for a while and tried to photograph on my mental plate the banal engraving on the wall, the beeches outside the window. In the afternoon I carpentered a hanging-cupboard of a rough kind which Virginia wanted in her room; believing that a piece of the house which I had altered a little with wood and screws might preserve my membership. In that spirit, I suppose, old men commission artists to make them expensive tombs; but less vainly, for in quiet places the dead have left behind a little of their presence. Kiss-Chick depressed me that day; with the ghastly explicitness of foreigners he told me again and again, 'Last time you do it, so, Serjeant-Mister!' I preferred to be with Aileen, busy getting a room ready for another London doctor who was coming to examine Charlotte and in a mood to scold me for my clumsiness; or with Shalce, who responded to some tenderness I showed him by heartily wetting my knees. Of Vaughan I saw very little before the evening, and the small encounters that we had were frigid. No doubt, and naturally, he saw with some distaste a stranger pretending to be a son of the house. He sat unshaved in the dining-room all morning, gloomily reading the *Manchester Guardian* which had clothed a haddock; and after lunch went out with Mistinguette and a gun.

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But I was not to escape all the rites of valediction. Virginia had contrived for supper a stupendous pie, on the crust of which Kiss-Chick had laboriously carved the words 'God Buy Sargent Roger — Combe agen.' And Vaughan himself produced two bottles of White Horse. These gestures, of which I was not forewarned, set up a painful sweating of my emotions. I said to myself, chewing bread and smiling feebly at the butter-knife, 'You have no connection with these people, they are related to you even less than the woman who used to be your wife. They are men and women of very ordinary types, you see them large and individual because your vision is slightly out of order, confused by your fear of a death which will be foreign and lonely. Friendliness is common in all small circles, you will find the same people all over again wherever you chance to go.' A voice so much more audible, because it was only a whisper, repeated, 'Nevertheless, you have been happy here.' It was fortunate that I was only required to pass things: the sphere of sound was wholly taken up by Vaughan and Virginia bickering.

'... Yes, Waggie, I know how you look at it. You think that when God started to make mankind he said, "There's only one brain to spare; I'll keep that for Vaughan Quindle."'

'My dear Ginnie, you're dodging the issue, the same as you did over the rabbit-hutch which I made and you pinched and gave me for my birthday. (You still owe me one-and-six for the hinges, by the way. Plus twenty-five years' interest.) All I'm saying is that the Equality of Opportunity you talk about so glibly would lead to a greater inequality than we have now. Take the case —'

'No, take the case I'm talking about — Ivy Evans's case. There's a girl with more talent for drawing than half the people whose stuff you see in the Bond Street galleries, and she's aching to be a dress-designer. And because her father's a poor man and can't afford to give her the proper training, she's going to spend her life getting forty-two shillings a week on the ironing floor of a Balham laundry.'

'Right. Well, leave out the fact that Ivy is probably half-bats, if she wants to design glamorous gowns for overfed and disagreeable



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women: suppose she really is the Gray's Elegy wonder-child you imagine. Now then, she starts lucky, *ex hypothesi*: and according to your system, she has her luck developed by an excellent technical education. All right. Everything chickety-boo for Ivy. Now what about her sister Gertie, who's born with a hare-lip and the brains of a demented dormouse? No talents, therefore no specialized education. She gets the routine treatment, forty-six howling infants taught by one half-baked spinster in a badly-lit classroom. No laundry job for Gertie—she goes into the garbage-sorting warehouse.'

'— Yes, but when you talk about crowded classrooms, let me tell you that the one thing we fight for —'

'For God's sake stick to the point, Ginnie! I'm trying to drive it into your cast-iron noddle that the present system is, in its rough and ready way, a very fair one. Clever children nowadays are mostly miseducated by the State, and that reduces the unfair advantage they start with. The overbred children of the well-to-do, who are mostly so feeble in mind as to be almost certifiable, are sent to Rugby and Charterhouse, where the best minds of the day instruct them in football and Greek verse. Thus morally fortified they are able to compete with the children of the poor, and presently sequester and put to cultural use some of the money which the self-made don't in the least know what to do with.'

'Well, I know I wouldn't work in a laundry,' Aileen said.

And Kiss-Chick said sadly: 'It is not truly plain. Roogby — the great professor Arnolt, the magister, you say so? But at Roogby they do not teach the boy to make gowns, I think, no?'

'The captain of the First Fifteen gives private tuition in needle-work,' Vaughan explained. 'Hence the word "Semester," meaning a term.'

'You agree with me, Father, don't you?' Virginia demanded.

'In the main,' Bernard said. 'Only I don't think you can consider what should be done with human beings till you've decided what human beings are for.'

'What are they for?' asked Vaughan sharply. 'I never can imagine.'

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'Roughly, I should say, to be happy and to create happiness. People nearly always forget one or other of those two purposes.'

Virginia said with asperity. 'As usual, you're trying to cloud the political issue with a fog of metaphysics.'

'I don't think so,' he answered. 'I don't see how you can hope to organize society unless you constantly remind yourself what your object is. The object of so many organizers, so far as they think about it at all, is a woolly abstraction called "progress." Progress, if I understand them rightly, means learning to get from one place to another in a shorter time, and increasing the population and the size of houses and the dividends of the joint-stock banks; or sometimes it means getting all the children in the world to wear clean pinafores and recite slabs of Julius Cæsar, and giving a refrigerator to every family, and everyone working a ten-hour week as supervisor of entirely automatic machinery and devoting the remaining hundred and thirty waking hours to folk-dancing and painting in tempera; then retiring at thirty-five and living to the age of a hundred and twenty. Generally it means a hotch-potch of all these things.'

'So you prefer people to live as they're living now — in Clydeside, for example?'

'Or at Dachau?' Vaughan added. 'You say that progress is a superstition. You talk about happiness as the elemental object. I say that happiness is a superstition. Happiness, how do you define it?'

'Yes — how?' we asked.

Bernard shook his head. 'Definitions are useless. I know of one, but you wouldn't accept it. And all the old apophthegms are too meagre — "the free exercise of the spirit," "the fulfilment of the self" — it's like trying to describe Virgil's poetry in four words or to write a précis of the *Appassionata*. I know that happiness lies separate from things and achievement. That's how people fail to find it. They nose for it among all the junk in the world's warehouse, terrified that it may be hidden under the one trinket they don't turn over. They think they see it just ahead, when the racing results will be in or a man will "declare himself" or the

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salaries will go up. They never dare to stop and listen, they never think of happiness as something which may be close and familiar.'

Virginia said quietly: 'But is it any use telling that to the people in Bermondsey!'

'Not if that's all you've got to tell them,' he said. 'But it's better than telling them that people are perfectly happy in Streatham.'

'I don't agree!' Vaughan said. He was drawing angry patterns with a fork on the tablecloth, he had not cold-shouldered the whisky. 'The donkey must have the carrot in front of its nose. It may not matter if the brute gets anywhere, but I see no point in making life more dull than it need be for the donkey.'

'For the donkey, no. But is it good enough, for men and women, just to be kept in motion by a hope eternally frustrated?'

Virginia said: 'It's better to see the carrot than just to see the darkness closing in.'

'Exactly!' Vaughan said. 'People sneer at escapists, but escapists seem to me the most sensible people on earth. Reality is only bearable if you can hide your eyes from it.' He stubbed his cigarette and immediately lit another. 'I was in Bristol when the fun was on there. There was a house burning. There was a family in the top floor, I saw the mother and one of the children for a second or two. We all stared, we couldn't do anything, there was nothing anyone could do. One of the men in the crowd was making the noise that birds make sometimes when a cat's got them. People were trying to get hold of him and get him away, but they couldn't. You see, it was his family, up there. The next night I was out dropping stuff on Hamm. You could see what was happening, now and then, looking down through the smoke. My rear gunner caught it that night. He'd just had his first child. He was dead by the time we landed. You know, I thought to myself: "God must find all this extremely interesting."'

Virginia, glancing at Bernard, said quickly: 'No, Waggie, you mustn't talk like that!'

'I shall talk just how I bloody well please! This is my home, isn't it — I'm not in the blasted Mess now. It would do a lot of

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good if people stopped talking cant and talked about facts as they find them.'

Just then I dared not look at Bernard. I only waited to see how he would take this challenge, as one waits for the explosion when a shell is falling close.

He said presently: 'Yes, you've had experiences which people like me can only faintly imagine. Only I can't have blasphemy — not in a room we pray in every day. I won't tolerate that. Vaughan, old lad —'

'Oh, for God's sake!'

I collected the things as quickly as I could and went to wash up. Kiss-Chick came and helped me until Virginia arrived and sent him away, saying it was bad for him to do so much standing.

'I'm sorry Vaughan's like this,' she said to me, in so hard a voice that I glanced at her face and saw that she — she, Virginia — was almost weeping.

I said: 'It's odd, a mere spoonful of alcohol makes some people a little subfusc in spirit. Some of the pleasantest people.'

'It didn't in the old days,' she said.

'What did he do in civvy street?' I asked inconsequently.

'A thing they call occupational therapy. Rather on his own lines — he'd study one homicidal maniac for weeks to find out the one thing besides murder which that man could make a success of. And he was working on a thing to give blind children the sensation of colour. . . . He's had a row with his C.O., I don't know what it's all about.'

But when we returned to the dining-room everyone was laughing; while Vaughan himself, perched on the fender, put his strangely mobile features through a ballet of grimace.

' . . . a kind of whistle, then a noise like when you take the valve out of a bicycle tyre. About every four words. I believe it's due to his getting a bit of shrapnel in his lungs during the last war, poor devil. So the situation was a trifle pregnant, as they say. There was Kippers, incomparably screwed, standing like a plaster image; knowing quite well he'd be as sick as a cat if he moved a muscle. And there was the Air Commodore, letting out his squeals and

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whistles, while O'Reilly was in the small bar, just the other side of a plywood partition, hunting rats with a .22 and a sealyham. Rather happy-go-lucky with firearms, O'Reilly, especially when pickled, and he was just firing wherever he thought he heard the rat; and since he's stone-deaf in one ear his sense of direction is peculiar unto himself. So you got the Commodore saying: "In my early days in the Service — whee-fisss" then, *Bang!* "Chase her, Tusker!" "we enjoyed a sense of comradeshippee-fisss" — *Bang!* "Hark forrard, Tusker, tear her guts, chum!" "which to some extent has persisteee-fisss" — *Bang!* "Rattle her, boy, after her, you basket, fetch her out, fetch her out!" And all the time the egregious Kippers saying "Yes, sir! . . . Just so, sir!" sweating to keep himself from belching, and getting more and more nervous, till he was saying "Yesss-sirwheee, Yesss-sir wheee." There came to be an element of absurdity in the conversation: "You've got some good stuff, I hope, among the youngsterseee-fisss?" — *Bang!* — "Yesss-sirwheee." — "Fetch her, Tasker, God damn the dog." — "Youngsterss, magnifissirwheee" — *Bang!* — "Have at her, you basket! Seek! Seek! Seek!" The Commodore was not outstandingly pleased. He may have felt he was being barracked a trifle. And when Kippers sent for me next day his mood was faintly unstable.'

'But he was Engliss Commandant?' Kiss-Chick inquired. 'In consequent what must they shoot him for?'

'But what did Kippers want you for?' Bernard asked.

'What for? I forget. Oh, it was a job that was going. A research station in Alberta — what they call "pilot-psychology," that sort of nonsense. He thought I might do to command it.'

'Rather up your street, I'd have said.'

'I reminded him that Bouncer Phillips had gone to Canada, and that Bouncer was not the kind of man one wants to share a Dominion with. And do you know, he was unspeakably irate. "I really cannot understand you, Quindle! Your attitude seems to me extraordinary!" How that man does wallow in pomposity. . . . Ginnie, catch!'

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He chucked his glass towards her: trying to catch it she fumbled and it broke on the floor.

'What a woman!' he said, and knelt to pick up the bits. 'Couldn't catch a bolster!'

She stooped to help him, and while they were side by side on the floor, laughing, I saw him put a casual kiss on her neck. The note of hysteria in his gaiety was disappearing. When the mess was cleared, and he dropped on to the chesterfield, he was only a rather boisterous schoolboy, tired and cheerful from a day in the open air.

The dogs, who had been much alarmed, returned circumspectly to their places on the hearth; and Marie Corelli, with the airs of a spoilt woman coming late to a party, kneaded a berth for herself on Vaughan's lap. Kiss-Chick put another log on the fire, and we were silent for a time, content with the fire's prattle and the recitative of Cleopatra's snores.

In that quietness I ceased to clutch at the skirts of time. I realized that these moments would slide quickly, as the last of any season do; that the shape of this communion would not be found again. But I knew, as you sometimes know at the instant of a personal achievement, that this hour's gift to me could not be lost in the receding tide. The fire's light lapping Kiss-Chick's tired hands; the feel of Virginia's shoulder against my side; these were intransient, too large in sum to fall through memory's torn interstices. With eyes half shut Aileen watched the fencing of her needles upon the fearful jersey she was constructing for Shalce; Cleopatra sprawled across her shoes, paws ludicrously treading the air, and whinnied faintly in a dream's anxiety. The white cloth was still on the table, and there Curtewn the shepherd, who had come for wages, sat over his beer and cheese: they stay together so long as memory will last, Curtewn's griseous hair overlapping his crimson neckerchief, and Vaughan's long legs stuck out across the hearth; Vaughan's red slippers against the sinuous pattern of the hearth-tiles, the sound of Kiss-Chick's stertorous breathing, a smell of pine burning and faintly of Virginia's hair. So much of Orchilly is abstract now: its lucent harmony, the roots it had in years far down, a sense of dignity and fullness. Those parts

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the eye should keep grow faint, I no longer see the colour of my bedroom wall and presently I shall not know how the passage turned which went to the Kiss-Chicks' room. But this hour stays close and animate: I was able to bring it back in the crowded hold of a troopship, in the stench and debris of Mersa Matruh. For the tune of Orchilly is echoed in this hour's silence; in the candid poverty of gas-lit walls, the night-wind's petulance against our windows; in the serenity of Bernard's marching eyes as he sits on a piano stool in his much-darned guernsey with paper and ragged books spread over his knees. The patterns I have gathered since, this very room where I am writing, the stampede of traffic through this haughty street, are trivial and anæmic against the breath of that reality.

Virginia said very quietly: 'Is it just that men are always like this — that they never want to do what people expect! Why did you turn the Canadian job down, Waggie?'

He stared at his nails. 'I've told you,' he said presently, 'I like to be with my friends. There are men in the crews at our place who amuse me.'

'How many trips have you done altogether?' she asked. 'I mean, the really dangerous ones?'

'It's a callow habit to count them,' he answered.

'As many as thirty?'

He evaded her. He said: 'I've had all this out with Mother, there's no point in discussing it any more. Flying's a chore, generally a rather boring one. If one isn't equipped with brilliance or with exalted patriotism one merely sticks to the job. It's mainly force of habit. Look at your own work. That must be the most tedious in the world, but you wouldn't chuck it up.'

'Not tedious,' she corrected. 'Everything except tedious. I often detest it.'

'But you wouldn't pack up?'

'I'm going to,' she said.

I remember a play (though I've forgotten its title) at the Français in which the greatest actress of her time made her confession with the three words, *Mais je l'aime*; how her voice, as she

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uttered that trite phrase, was so faint with passion and terror you had said it would not travel beyond the footlights; and how, close to the roof where I was, we felt as if a giant wave broke in against our ears and hearts. It is that kind of quietness which can drown mere noise. And that, I think, is how, when Virginia said 'I'm going to,' I failed to hear or notice Charlotte as she came in by the squeaky passage door and stood by the piano. I saw her, as if she had materialized from the empty air, only when she moved towards the fire. Even then we did not stir at once, as at another time our manners would have bid us. Vaughan, with his eyes fixed on Virginia's face, moved only an inch or two to give her greater room on the sofa; where she sat down silently, distraught and a little forlorn.

And yet she was so beautiful that I felt afresh and instantly the shabbiness of the room; in an old, brocaded dressing-gown, with her eyes dark from too much reading and her skin sallow with illness, she was still a finer being than Vaughan with his perfect body, his splendid brows. In these last days the whole of her body seemed to have become smaller, her delicate hands looked pitifully small; yet in this shrunk and fragile shape her grace was kept, and the stature of her dignity. In silence, presently, Bernard swept away his books and took his accustomed place on the floor beside her legs. It was Virginia who, off-handedly, put a cushion behind her back; while Vaughan took one of her hands between his own.

'But why?' Vaughan asked, his eyes still following Virginia as she moved. 'You never stopped playing the games I beat you in!'

Her voice was still unnatural when she answered, 'In those days there was no other way of passing the time.'

'You mean — it's because of Edgar?'

She nodded: a motion so slight I hardly saw it. These two when they wished could pass the shuttlecock of thoughts with barely a word or gesture, and as if they were alone in the room.

'But he won't have changed,' he said. 'I know about his getting shot up — that won't have changed him.'

'Aileen,' Virginia said, 'supposing Ivan was always carrying on with other women, suppose he went and left you; and then suppose you heard one day that he was helpless —'



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'Ivan?' she said, and she turned to look at him; but he like Curteawn had fallen asleep. 'Ivan would never go after other girls.'

'But if he did?'

'It depends on whether I still loved him.'

'Just so!' Vaughan said. 'Ginnie, d'you think you can start to love Edgar again!'

With a certain harshness she said: 'That isn't the question. I'm too old for sentimentality.'

'But can you be any use to people when you're loathing them?'

She said recklessly: 'You can cover it up. There's nothing you can't do if you put your mind to it.' And in a kind of desperation: 'Father, that's right, isn't it?'

'Not exactly!' He hesitated. His mouth took shape to go on and then relaxed, like a sprinter's body when the pistol jams. His eyes were on me, but merely as an aiming mark, and I saw his hands searching for the pipe he often sucked. It was not, I believe, the presence of Aileen and me which troubled him; I saw him then not as a shy man but as one who has been lost in some adventure outside the common range and seeks to explain it to a group of foreigners. He said at last: 'In a way I feel as Vaughan does. You can't be any use to people unless you love them. I don't think it's any use trying to be.' His eyes suddenly were joined with mine. 'Wouldn't you agree?'

Not fully understanding, I said: 'With me it isn't.'

'And that man,' Vaughan said, his eyes finding the image of Edgar in a dark corner of the room, 'is one who can't be loved.'

Still talking half to himself, Bernard said abruptly: 'But people mean such different things when they talk of "love." Some mean a form of sensuality, some mean gratitude; a great many are thinking of romantic chivalry, or the watercolour kinds of sentiment which are derived from it.'

'And you?' Vaughan asked.

'I include all those,' he said hesitantly, 'but I believe they're only the flower of loving, not the roots of it. All those are mainly passive, they're the way we react to things that happen to ourselves. I don't know, I'm not much use in speculative thinking. But it

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seems to me that love in its essence is positive, it implies a singleness of mind, its strength is something near to violence. When the lover's passion is only a reflection of the pleasantness or goodness of the loved it'll stop working as soon as there's nothing to reflect. But the love that's positive will work more fiercely when the loved thing becomes sour and ugly. I seem to see that kind of love quite clearly, almost as if it were a personality, although it's outside my own compass. I think of people I've run into — mean, cruel, calculating people, men with pimps' eyes and the hearts of wasps — and I know I could never have loved them. But supreme love would pass right through the sordid outskirts, it would go on hunting for the small and lonely creature who's kept a prisoner inside.'

Virginia said: 'I understand that.'

'It's all right for us. It's not good enough for Ginnie,' Vaughan said.

From the rim of my eyes I had looked at Charlotte's face, which was still and passive as the face of one sleeping. I was startled when she first spoke, asking very gently:

'But is Virginia to have no more happiness? She's had so little of that!'

With his voice matched to hers Bernard said: 'I don't think happiness is kept in any compartment. It's not like a subtle wine which loses its bouquet if you jog it about. It's more like the melody of battle, it dies when you stop fighting.'

Vaughan said sombrely: 'There's no music in any battle I've had anything to do with.'

'You're really an incorrigible puritan, Wag. You're like Aunt Hattie, she always went to revivalist meetings at Exeter Hall, that being her notion of pleasure, and never enjoyed them at all. She kept wondering if it was wrong to have travelled on the train, because the money she'd paid for her fare might enable the railway shareholders to buy more drink; she thought it was quite likely that God would arrange an excruciating accident for her on the way home.'

I heard Virginia say sorrowfully under cover of the men's voices, 'But Mother, you always wanted me to marry him.'

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'You were never an easy girl to help,' Charlotte answered. 'Are you never going to forgive me for one error of judgement? Will you never trust me any more?'

'Darling, you know that isn't what I meant! I just don't want you to be worried about it, I can work things out for myself.'

'No woman's ever left to do that.' Her eyes turned to Bernard again, her voice was still very quiet. 'You realize, don't you, that all the happiness she's ever found has come from the work she does? I don't know how, I could find no pleasure in it myself, it would bore me to insanity. But Virginia does. Do you want her to lose it all, just for the sake of one completely worthless individual whom she doesn't love in the least?'

'But my darling, it's not just any individual. It's the one she has made her husband.'

'Does that make so much difference?'

Virginia said: 'Yes, Mother, it does.'

It was Vaughan's face on which my eyes, in their shy wandering, had rested. I saw him look towards Virginia and for an instant smile: it was such a smile, tight-mouthed, as a man gives to a stranger he finds beside him in a shell-hole. Ashamed to have lighted on their secrecy I looked away, to where Aileen was bent over her knitting. I saw her glance at Kiss-Chick as he slept, and she too faintly smiled, and stretching one arm pulled up the cushion between the chair's back and his neck.

'And you, Bernard,' Charlotte persisted, 'you think it does? You think a woman's got to give up everything for one man, because she once said a certain formula in a church?'

His hand, bent back upon her lap, was searching for hers but did not find it. Like a sailor lost in the confinement of a city he said: 'Not just because of that.'

Curtewn woke up, sneezed twice, and piled together the impedimenta of his meal. 'In Bible truth I'd fare no better in my own cote,' he said courteously, and tweaked his cap to each of the women, and manœuvred himself away.

'And you, Mother,' Vaughan said, 'it's time you were in bed. I'll carry you up.'

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But she did not seem to hear him. She spoke to Bernard again, and though her tired voice was never raised, never roughened, it began to sound with unnerving insistence, like a child's practice on the piano, like distant rifle fire at night.

‘But it only works one way. A woman has to shape her whole life to that of the man she marries. All her own ambitions have to be subordinated, all her powers, her philanthropy. It's never the other way round.’

Virginia glanced at her father sharply. We knew what Charlotte meant as well as he did. It was a little time before he answered, and then he said, as one exhausted, ‘My dear, you've had a wretched deal, I know that. Yes, I know that. Perhaps I was wrong all the time. I don't know. You have a duty to God and a duty to man. I — well, I put them in that order.’

‘But if you bring religion in,’ she said in the same tone, ‘why shouldn't Virginia do so too? Why can't she call her present work her duty to God? It looks more like it to me.’

‘She can — if that's what she believes,’ he said.

Vaughan looked at me, and for that moment, at least, we were in sympathy. Helpless, we sat at the same spectacle: of two who searched for each other in different hemispheres.

‘I've made you my promise,’ Bernard said at last, ‘you know I'd never go back on that. We shan't return to China till you're perfectly well again.’

‘Or until I'm dead.’

He caught his breath. ‘Lottie — you mustn't talk like that!’

I thought she would say no more; forgetting that women drive forward precisely where a man would hold the favourable ground. She began to speak a little faster.

‘Surely I can claim a little for the time that's left. Something more like life than rotting in this wilderness.’

‘My dear, if I know of a better place I could get hold of — ’

‘— I've heard from Robert again. About the Patricia Hospital at Bournemouth — I told you, about the job there. Robert says it would be perfect for a man who's not in his first youth, you don't deal with anything except the private wing — it's mostly rich old

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ladies who merely imagine they're ill. I've a lot of old friends in Bournemouth. You'd hear music there, it's very good for music. There's a house of sorts, very small, it would do us for a time. The salary's not enormous, but —'

He asked, bewildered, 'But who's going to give hospital jobs to a man who's been out of touch with English medicine for thirty years?'

'Robert is. That's the advantage of wartime, they're short of doctors everywhere. Only he wants to know quickly, he can't keep the other trustees waiting for an answer. It needn't be a permanency. You agree to serve for five years, in the first instance —'

'Five years! Five years of coddling old women who think they're ill!'

'There'd be other cases. Bernard, listen, you've got to think —'  
Vaughan said: 'It sounds a good offer, Father.'

'Five years!' Bernard repeated. 'In five years' time I shall be sixty-nine. My friends in China will almost have forgotten me —'

'*Your* friends!' she said. 'Always *your* friends!'

For a few moments he was like a man locked out from his own house. He said confusedly: 'I hate having to pour cold water on all your plans. I didn't realize you were taking Robert seriously — I thought it was just a random idea of his. My dear, I should love you to have a chance of seeing your friends, I should love you to have the kind of life you've always wanted. If it didn't mean closing down my work altogether. Or if my business was a purely selfish one, just a whim of my own.'

'No man ever thinks that,' she said, 'whatever it is that he's set his heart on. But you know, the life wouldn't be dull for you. Your English friends would all come to see you at Bournemouth, just as they come to this place. You'd be just as busy, only you'd be looking after people instead of animals.'

'Looking after people, yes, but that isn't the whole of what I want. None of that is what I'm really after.'

'"What I want"! "What I want"!'

'You must give me time,' he said desperately. 'It's not a decision one can make in a moment. It's not like choosing between a house

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in town or in the country. It's a choice between going forward or stopping dead in one's tracks.'

'No,' Charlotte said; and now the smallness of her voice frightened me, 'I want a decision now. Listen. Listen! Do you know what Vaughan said to me. (No, Vaughan, you're not to interrupt me!) He said: "I can't give up my job so long as Father sticks to his." Do you see what your fanaticism's leading to? No, I'm not going to wait any more, I want your decision now.'

Only (I think) a few seconds passed, and he started to speak. I believe we all knew what his answer would be, and feared it, and ached to get it over. I remember a curious idea which possessed me at that moment: 'This is the end of the illusion, the landscape where I childishly saw mountains will no longer be higher or wilder than the Sussex Downs.' But he stopped before a single word was out; stopped, and looked dimly at Aileen's knitting as if his mind had changed its course and was wandering easily away. We watched him, all of us except Charlotte, whose gaze was no less negligent than his. We watched him, and obliquely we watched her; and neither seemed to realize we were watching.

Looking once more at my memory of that minute (a minute? it may have been less than that) I am impressed by its sober colouring. In the theatre, when someone has to announce a momentous decision he is set in a carefully patterned group; the lights are arranged, the pauses timed, the actor tunes his voice to the line's importance. Here, in a room of no distinction, a shabby man sat untidily on the floor; his wife who was tired and ill sat behind him, their grown-up children fidgeted and by the table a wizened foreigner was asleep. You would find a scene no more prosaic in any house in Wimbledon. Yet nothing contrived by heroic fancy can fasten on my mind as did the ingenuous shape of this reality; no declamation ever lit the small and fluid fires in me as the groping words of this unpretentious being did.

'I've promised not to go back without you, I can't promise you more than that. You are asking me to pack up, you want me to finish my active life for good and all. Yes, Lottie, you do, that's exactly what you're asking for: my heart and body belong to China,

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I understand the Chinese in a way that hardly any foreigners do, if I turn my back on them I'm a finished tool. Listen, listen — I know you look on me as an arrogant egotist, you may even think I'm wrong in the head. But — but we can't survive without a kind of madness. We've been trying for years in this island to live by our own resources, taking in each other's moral washing. That's why we're dying of spiritual inanition. In every generation now we send our children to the newest hells to save our civilization, and the civilization they save is becoming atrophied from lack of exercise. You, Vaughan, you must see what I'm driving at! We've had the gospel for more than a thousand years, we've passed it round among ourselves like an old photograph till it's too worn and familiar to set us alight. I don't see how we'll get any farther if we just go on doing that, I don't see what we're getting for all that people suffer to keep us alive. My darling, can't you see a bit what I mean? — it hurts me so terribly to seem so utterly selfish. But if I signed myself off the working list I'd no longer be a man at all, you might as well be married to an automaton. A man's got no value, he's merely a hundredweight or so of sentient tissues, till he's made himself part of something indestructible. And he can't do that till he's fully in action. I know I've given you so little. But how could I give you any happiness at all if my own fire was petering out!

'No,' she said quite quietly, 'I was always wrong to think you might care for me as much as you care for China.'

He answered instantly: 'It isn't that, it isn't just my love for China. It's love for something larger, and China is the place it leads me to. If I were a great man I might be entirely different. Their genius works on anything that's close at hand. If one's powers are small and commonplace one has got to stretch them that much farther. You must, you must understand just this. A great many women went through agony to bring me to birth. Thousands of men have slaved to give me all the things I've got — this house and the clothes I'm wearing, the train that brought us here — thousands more have died to set and keep me at liberty. That's only a part of what I've got to account for. I keep thinking and thinking of the millions since the day of Golgotha who've made their lives

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a bridge across the wastes of hopelessness. I can't pay for that with my small change, my pride won't let me. We're not required to be heroic now: no one's asking me to suffer contempt or torture. Surely I can't give less than the whole of my strength! When the battle they've left to me is such a paltry one I can't clear out of it with not a limb torn, without a smear of blood or dirt on my body.'

Freshly awake, Kiss-Chick said eagerly: 'You will tell me leave to agree, pliss. Scheunemann, Doctor of Vienna — most learned doctor — he tell me, "It is not the wound, it is the dirty in the wound that make the body sick." If I was in Vienna now I must take you some *Gallspachs Desinfektionsmittel* — four schillinge for big vessel — what Scheunemann tell it is wonder-good.'

'You're wrong, Ivan,' Bernard said gently. 'It's arsenic I want for my complaint — I blather too much. Look, I've sent your wife to sleep.'

Vaughan said: 'Ginnie, do you remember that woman on the boat who said, "I understand your father better when he's quoting Greek than when he's talking English; though of course I don't know a word of Greek"?''

'Wag, that's an impudent fiction!'

'I remember her,' Charlotte said sleepily. 'Odd things she used to do. She left her wig in the toilet once. The stewardess who found it was terribly worried, she said, "I don't know where the rest of the poor lady's got to."'

'Oh, and do you remember that New Zealander,' Virginia asked, 'the one who carried his wife's ashes about in a snuff-box and showed them to everyone he met?'

'Yes,' said Bernard, 'and I remember the dear old lady who said to him, "How sweetly pretty she must have been before she — er — got like that!"'

'And do you remember . . .?'

I slept as soundly as ever that night, and woke with a strange sense of security. Very early (for my leave was technically over at reveille) I went down to the main road to wait for an R.A.S.C. truck which came that way. I had my luggage balanced on the bicycle, and Virginia came with me to bring the bicycle back.



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As if maliciously the day had broken in peculiar splendour. Except for one plume of frondose cloud the sky was stripped, the edge of the night's chill already blunt, the light which played on the arpeggio of greens was a distillation of silver. I think I had never heard the cheerfulness of birds exalted to so vast a diapason. Walking in silence, I hungered to keep hold of this treasury, untainted by the smell of clothes and oil, the mafficking of pistons. But the melancholy I had feared left me alone. Obscurely (for my thoughts had not been riddled then) I knew this morning that Orchilly was not dependent on the shape of its walls or the sky's lenience; not even on the urgent tides of its routine or the pattern of its voices. I said to Virginia, with my eyes on the ruffled corsage of Nelden: 'I wish I could be sure of remembering all this,' and she answered, 'I suppose one doesn't forget anything that matters.' Then we talked of Aileen, and of what Shalce might become when he grew up.

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As it happened, I did not see Orchilly in sunshine again. Almost as soon as I got back they sent me on a course for instructors in military hygiene. Perhaps they had confused me with a lop-eared person called Huddleston who abetted the Medical Officer; possibly the Regiment had to fill the vacancy and noticed I had not been on a course for some time. The thing did me no harm, and the sergeants' mess was a good one. I took down a number of statistics about the incidence of typhus and left them in the train.

The good weather stayed for a time, and the spirits of the Battery seemed more lively. But to me the outfit was poorer by the loss of two or three men who had been posted away. Harry Borden had gone (in a crescendo of blasphemy, they told me) to a Training Wing at Bulford; and another Regular, Fred Vickall, had been sent

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to Gibraltar to join a regiment which, we afterwards heard, had been in Kirkcudbrightshire all the time. (Later on he got to Sicily, and was killed there.) I had liked those two better than most of the amateurs; they were hard as teak, and often brutal, with a core of kindness; they jeered at every word I said, almost every movement I made, but you knew where you were with them and in their own way they taught me everything. Fred had been a Larkhill instructor in his time, and Harry had once been up as far as B.S.M. before he was broken for knocking out (under liquor) a Bandmaster's teeth. They knew the elements of gunnery as the amateur never does, and in total ignorance of Signora Montessori's devices they could somehow ram it into the granite-skulled. They regarded every new regulation as something to be outflanked, in the way that High Churchmen steer their course among the Thirty-Nine Articles; any scheme for making the Army's outlook more up to date affected them as an August breeze affects the Albert Hall. Yet they and their kind gave tectonic shape to what would else have been a children's paper-chase; and we learnt from them, as far as tyros can, to think of battle as of seasonal fatigues. Another who had left was Gazingthorpe, a cherubic dwarf from Huddersfield who in real life was a builder's mason and kept bees for a hobby. In his attestation paper he had described himself, with a touch of snobbery, as 'apiarist'; and now he was transferred to the Veterinary Corps. His loss made a difference too. A Methodist of lively conscience, he would take over anyone's tour as Orderly Sergeant at a moment's notice; and, unexpectedly, he could give a more artistic imitation of Marshal Goering in the throes of diarrhoea than any man I have known.

This is the disadvantage which we suffer when our way of life is compared with the nautics'. They have a ship which they take about with them, it has a personality and keeps them together; while we depend on people for that. I have come across tank crews who felt as a sailor does about their monstrous vessel. But nobody can love a 25-pounder, which is precisely the same as all its fellows; or I can't. You put up tents in a field; you may plant a few flowers, and make friends with a local cobbler, and the place begins to be

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your own. Then the order comes, you strike and bundle, and a hundred miles away you start all over again. No, we have only people to make our frame, one of them goes and the thing seems slightly buckled: only people, and stories about the ones who have disappeared; an aged gramophone, a method of laying out kits, a quiff or two in our ceremonial drill.

We were at four hours' notice again. Once in every three days we did a brigade exercise, in which all the 18-sets were out of net from the word go and the final schemozzle was of picturesque proportions. In the intervening periods we did the gas T.O.E.T.s again. We practised night deployment, and listened to lectures on R.T. procedure from a man without a roof to his mouth.

The day when Bernard telephoned is woven in my mind by a C.O.'s inspection, in which everyone was drenched from a thunderstorm, and by a cinema piece which the Powers with peculiar charity laid on for us in lieu of the normal P.T. It portrayed the British Army's withdrawal towards the Channel ports, epitomized in the actions of the 'Forty-second London Guards Regiment.' This unit, for reasons I forget, had a young American as its colonel. The colonel's wife, attired as a private soldier, served him as batman, and was actually holding his hands while he gave such orders as 'Tell the men to hold on — at all costs' in tones of sibilant emotion. His mistress, uniformed as a Fifth Avenue nurse, was evidently in command of the Regimental Aid Post; and a dance band of the Harlem kind, escaping from Brussels, followed him in a horse-drawn wagon. From time to time the wife made speeches recommending monogamy and the mistress dwelt on the virtues of renunciation. Towards the end, the Germans, after indignant cries of 'Mein Gott!' along the skyline, brought up a six-inch mortar of an unusual pattern and fired it horizontally at the colonel at a range of forty yards. The mistress foiled this savagery by placing her person in the projectile's path, the wife in a Philadelphia accent observed that 'This was for England,' and the band rendered 'Only in the deep, deep Jordan.' We were a little lost in the volutions of this drama, but we understood that it was intended as stimulus to our morale.

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I was on the way back to my bunk when a flustered gunner caught me and said I was wanted in the Battery Office. There I found De Vicquer, the Battery Commander, and Frickett, the B.S.M., in a kind of corybantic ecstasy, the entire hut sanded with one-o-eights and acquittance rolls. 'Someone wants you on the 'phone,' De Vicquer said. 'You might tell him with my compliments not to make a habit of this.' 'Some blokes,' the B.S.M. added, 'when you put three stripes on their arms they get to fancy the Battery Office is their own private perishin' Y.M.C.A.'

I took the receiver and the voice I heard was Bernard's; or claimed to be, for I should not have known it.

'I'm most fearfully sorry,' he said, 'I was wondering — could you possibly come and give me a hand. Just an hour or so. Everything's rather tricky, Charlotte's had a bad turn. And Aileen's in bed with jaundice. But look here, not if it's the slightest bother.'

I said to De Vicquer: 'I wonder — could I spend the night out of camp, sir. I'm on Inlying Picquet but I could get someone to answer for me. It's rather important.'

'Oh God!' he said wearily. 'On this of all nights!' (I didn't know, or at that moment wonder, what he meant by that.) 'What is it? Kid sister getting divorced? Sailor brother home from West Indies, not seen him for nine months?'

'It's only a friend,' I said. 'His wife's sick.'

'Can't be done, sir!' Frickett said automatically.

Mercifully De Vicquer ignored him. 'It's a blasted nuisance,' he said, 'if you'll pardon my French. All right. But you've got to be back in camp by o-five-hundred. D'you clearly understand that? . . . Frickett, for God's sake get on to Regiment and ask them very politely what in bloody hell this chit about Wallets, anti-gas is meant to mean if it's meant to mean anything at all. . . . O-five-hundred, and don't forget it! Are you all right for money?'

I was at Orchilly some ninety minutes later; rather damp, I remember, with sweat and from the rain. I found Kiss-Chick taking down the pictures from the dining-room one by one and laboriously cleaning them; evidently this was a part of Aileen's routine for Fridays. He had Shalce trapesing after him, and he was

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weeping. How was he to bring up the little boy, he asked, if Aileen died? Did I think he would marry another woman, when his Aileen had been so beautiful, so good, so loving! It was vain for me to tell him that jaundice was normally a thing you recovered from; the Blessed Ones, he said, who knew he was unworthy of a perfect woman, were taking her away from him. Presently Bernard came down.

'Roger, it's most terribly kind. . . . Listen, I'll just tell you what I want. I wrote it down somewhere, what you have to do. Wait, I'll find it. Well, never mind, I can tell you.'

His voice and movements were quiet, rather rapid. Too quiet: like the actions of men before battle, the part always a little overplayed. In shaving he had missed one side of his chin; but his eyes alone would have told me how it was with him. He didn't sit down at all. Had he sat on the sofa he would, I think, have fallen immediately asleep.

'The stuff in the small bottle, that's all you've got to worry about. That's only if the pain gets bad. But I don't think she'll wake, she's sleeping very well now. Yes, I'm pretty sure to be back before she wakes, I only want you to be with her just in case — she might be frightened if she woke and there was no one there. What? Oh, I should have told you, it's Ian Mackenzie, he's coming down from Carlisle, I'm taking the cart to meet him at Cernwith. There's not a hope of getting a cab there. You know, it's frightfully decent of him to come, he's so terribly busy. And there isn't a better doctor for this sort of thing, there just isn't anyone to touch him.'

He went on giving me directions: to watch the temperature of Charlotte's room, to raise her head a little if she woke, to give her very weak tea if she were thirsty. He was moving about the room, straightening a picture which Kiss-Chick had hung crookedly, sometimes smiling inconsequently as the wounded do. 'You might have a look at Aileen just once or twice. He' (Kiss-Chick) 'will get anything she wants, only she might not be able to explain. Roger, it's awfully kind of you! The train's bound to be a bit late. You'll tell her, if she does wake, that I won't be long? I suppose you

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haven't such a thing as a cigarette on you? It's so different, you know, from looking after a patient who isn't — well, from looking after any other patient. I'll be glad when Ian gets here. You've had something to eat, have you? The great thing is, I don't want her to worry. She's inclined — you know how people get when they're ill — she dwells on little things.'

He was in no condition, I thought, to drive to Cernwith. I offered to do it for him.

'No,' he said, 'it's awfully good of you, but I — I shouldn't like it quite. Calpurnia's odd, she plays up a bit if she meets any traffic, you've got to know her tricks.'

'But couldn't Curtewn go?'

'Not in this rain. He's been soaked once to-day already. And he gets sciatica.'

I said: 'I do wish you'd let me go. I can manage Calpurnia all right.'

He went and looked out of the window, I thought he was going to give in. Then he said abruptly: 'I've got to go. I must get away — you see what I mean — I must get out of this place for a bit. It's rather getting me down.'

I helped him harness up. 'You're perfectly clear about the medicine?' he said, and drove away.

I took my boots off and went up to Charlotte's room. It was in the perfect order which I was used to finding, in this room there had been no neglect. Only the bottles and impedimenta on a table by the bed showed that anything had changed; those and a faint smell in the room which was unfamiliar and which I got to know later on.

She slept with her head on her arm. She had a quilted jacket on and her hair was neatly dressed. Her appearance had not altered at all since I had last seen her. And she seemed to sleep normally, her breathing was deep and quiet.

Presently, as she had not stirred, I left her and paid a visit to Aileen, who was in wretched condition and anxious about Kiss-Chick; she knew he had eaten nothing since the night before. I promised to see about this; but when I found him he was hunting

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for candles (intending, he explained, to make a little altar in Aileen's room) and would not be persuaded. He would get some supper for Mrs. Quindle in a few minutes, he said, but for himself nothing. I took Shalce away and put him rapidly to bed.

Charlotte still appeared to be sleeping soundly when I returned. I sat a little way from the bed again. After a time she opened her eyes, as if she had not really been asleep at all. She looked at me steadily, and presently smiled.

'I knew you'd come,' she said. 'It's sweet of you to come, I get so bored.'

It relieved me to find her voice so normal; I had expected to hear it faint and halting. And her eyes were steady, as they had always been. She asked:

'Has Bernard gone to do the milking?'

I said: 'He'll be back very soon.'

'Listen,' she said, 'I want to know about the telegram. He said he'd show it to me, and then he said he'd lost it.'

'The telegram?'

'Yes, yes, it came this morning. He said it was from Stubbald Oakley. I'm sure he's made a mistake, none of Bernard's friends ever send telegrams, they just arrive.'

I said I should ask Bernard about it directly he came in, but she would not be satisfied. This, it appeared, was one of the little things which Bernard had said she worried about.

'You could telephone to the post office at Cernwith,' she said. 'I wish you'd do that. They'll have a copy there, they'll read it to you.'

It seemed wisest to prick this abscess. I went downstairs and made the call. I was sorry to give trouble, I said, but Dr. Quindle had not fully understood a telegram delivered to him that morning; perhaps they had a copy which they could read to me.

I heard the old lady who answered me call to her sister, and a palaver followed of which I heard nothing but the tones of the two voices. Those were enough to warn me. When the old woman at last decided to read me the telegram I felt no shock; I might almost have heard the whole of it before. '... deeply regret ...

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Squadron-Leader Vaughan Desmain Quindle . . . killed . . . operations.'

Kiss-Chick was waiting impatiently to consult me. He had made a steak-and-kidney pudding in the morning; should he heat it up for Mrs. Quindle's supper, or would she prefer it cold, did I think? I said he must wait, and that Bernard would tell him later on. Charlotte had not moved when I got back. 'It's just what Bernard said,' I told her. 'Stubbald Oakley's coming for a few days.' She nodded. 'Stubbald Oakley, yes, I remember. So amusing! Do you think I could have the lamp now?'

I lit the lamp and set it near the foot of the bed as she directed. 'I don't want you to see me too clearly,' she said. 'People look horrible when they're ill. I'm fairly ill, you know. Bernard thinks so, and even Bernard can't always be wrong.'

I said without reflection: 'Surely he's a splendid doctor!'

'He has quite a reputation,' she answered. 'You get a reputation, of course; if you do your doctoring where the local ideas of medicine are rudimentary, as they were in Kansu Province. It doesn't matter so much if you kill more patients than the average doctor does in England. The Chinese rather expect to die, it's almost their national hobby. But you know, they're not very beautiful when they're dying. There's hardly any sight less appetizing than a Chinese dying of cholera. I speak as an authority. We had our house in Lan-Chau quite full of them once. You wouldn't remember, you and Virginia were babies then.'

I looked at her eyes, only a yard or so away from mine. They seemed to stay quiet and unclouded. I said casually:

'Vaughan must have been very attractive as a child.'

'Vaughan?' she said. 'Yes, he was a pretty child.' And a little afterwards, 'I want to know what there was in that telegram. I shall make Bernard tell me when he comes.'

The door opened just then; but it was Kiss-Chick who came in. On a huge tray he had the steak-and-kidney pudding; all of it; with a tureen full of boiled potatoes and a stook of rhubarb. 'I hope she will like it!' he whispered. I told him to put this issue on a chair, and asked if he would add to his kindness by making a little fresh



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tea. He picked up several pairs of Charlotte's shoes and went off to clean them.

'The light's not very good,' Charlotte said. 'Who was that?'

I told her.

'Yes yes,' she said. 'He reminds me so often of old Quindle — Bernard's father, you know. The same obsequiousness. Quite a dear old man, though pathetically stupid. He quite thought he was paying for the whole of Bernard's education. Of course my uncle was really paying — he was old Quindle's employer, you know. Listen — come closer! They're all of them a little soft in the head, the Quindles. Of course, I should have realized, but I was rather obstinate. I thought something could be done with the boy, he had such very nice eyes. Like Vaughan's eyes. Vaughan was a nice-looking boy. Only of course I didn't see him much, he was at school in England and I was kept in China. All through those years. I want the light nearer. Just turn it up. Don't argue, please, just turn it up!'

I asked her if she felt any pain, and she answered rather sharply, 'I'm not a coward, I don't grumble over pain.'

I wanted to draw the curtains, for the dreary relic of daylight disturbed me, but it was some time before I could persuade myself to cross the few feet of carpet and do so. I no longer understand the nervousness I suffered then: I had been accustomed to the quietness of this house, and another's illness is surely nothing to be afraid of. As nearly as I can recall those moments, they were like an experience of my childhood, when my father left me for a quarter of an hour in a doctor's waiting-room. A man with a beard — he must have been French, I think — began to talk with me; and because I could not understand him I fancied he was some kind of animal in human disguise, and blubbered loudly till my father returned. There is, perhaps, a fear of light akin to the fear of darkness. I remember the dusty shaft which fell on the Frenchman's face, and how it brought into relief the little, monstrous hairs below his eyes. Here, as the outskirts of the room retreated into shadow, the light within the lamp's small field was intensified. Folds and creases in the bedclothes showed now as hills and valleys in an artless photo-

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graph. A stain upon the coverlet grew hard in outline. And on the flesh-clad structure weighing down the pillow, strangest of created things, material but alive, animal but self-knowing, I saw tiny crystals of sweat in the mouth's crutch, minute machinery that struggled like a captured beast in the eyes' crevices. So solid this image was, so still except for the bee's-wing flutter of the underlip, the sun and cloud within the irises. If she had groaned, or moved convulsively, I believe I should not have been so timorous. But she did not move at all. She only smiled now and then, where nothing gave reason for smiling.

She had been silent for a while, and I hoped she would fall back into sleep, when she said abruptly: 'I can't think why he's taking so long.'

Unguardedly, I reminded her that trains were often late in these days.

'Trains?' she said. 'You mean he's gone to the station?'

I said in confusion: 'I believe he told me something about meeting a train. There's a doctor coming, a doctor from Carlisle. Mackenzie, I think he said. He wants him just to look you over.'

And then she laughed. It was uncomfortable to listen to her narrowed laughter.

'So that was the story!' she whispered. 'And you really believed that! My poor boy, you're so very simple! Why, he's gone away, of course. He was only waiting for his chance. China — that was his idea. All he wanted was to get back to China.'

It seemed to me wiser not to argue with this caprice of sickness; or perhaps I lacked the guts for it — it is hard to tell at this distance. In the English way I took refuge in the practical. 'I must see if Kiss-Chick's got that tea,' I said. 'You'd like some tea, wouldn't you, and then I think you ought to sleep again.'

'But wait!' she said, 'wait a moment!'

Her hand came out from the bedclothes and sowed in the air. I saw what she wanted, and reluctantly gave her mine to hold. I remember how dry and cold her hand was.

'Of course,' she said, 'you think he wouldn't leave me like this. Naturally you think that!' It was very patient, the way that she

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spoke now, reminding me of a clever teacher's patience with an inordinately brainless child. A certain oddity had infected her voice; a word here and there came quick and high, as a careful walker's feet will slip on an icy road; and yet, as I labour to recall her words, the tone in which they come is only a little fainter than her voice at our first encounter. 'You all admire him for being adventurous, everyone says how fine it was to give up his career and lose himself in a foreign country. Yes, that's how you see it, you think it was a great act of sacrifice. Do you know why he really went to China? — I'll tell you. (Don't go away, please don't go away!) You see, he could never be happy in London, he felt his awkwardness in the way that an *arriviste* always does. He thought that so long as people saw him closely they'd always know what kind of man he really was. Of course it was foolish. I could have helped him, I knew all the ropes, I could have steered him through all the difficulties. That's all I wanted to do, I was ready to give up my life to that. Don't you think it was rather hard for me: those years when we were young and strong, and he made us hide away like outlaws in the Kansu villages. Listen, listen — why do you keep going away? You're not cross with me, are you! Can't you see what it was like when I had to send you away, you and Ginnie standing on the deck in your little red coats, and all the months to pass before I'd see you again.'

Except for these intermittent breaks the voice had run steadily, even and monotonous like a train on a good track; as when you see a play for the second time, I felt as if she were reciting a passage she had used many times before. But now her speech began to move in gentle undulations which had no relation to what she said. I had the impression (you will recognize it if you have talked to certain old and solitary people) that someone whom I did not know was talking to me through her mouth and through her eyes. I want to forget this, but I cannot forget it. I am putting it down here as accurately as I can, and perhaps when it is fixed on paper, and can be looked at like the vulgar atrocities they keep in waxwork shows, it will come to be something commonplace and unalarming: the smile, I mean, which formed itself on one side of her mouth and stayed

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there; and one of her eyes becoming frigid, and the other struggling as a man will struggle to get to his feet not knowing that his legs have gone.

'And that was all for the sake of his God,' she said, 'the God they tell you is love and kindness!' Very weakly she was laughing. 'Madman!' she said, 'he was mad if he believed all that! All that for a God of kindness! I hate him, Waggie, I hate him, hate him! But I won't let God have him, I tell you I won't let him go!'

She had drawn my hand in towards her face and now it was against her smiling mouth. It was a kind of kiss she gave to my hand, but in her urgency she bit deeply into my flesh. I did not try to get my hand loose: one could not fight against her then, and the pain, which would have been very great, was anæsthetized by the terror in which this foreign journey had plunged me. I kept quite still, and a long time seemed to pass until her power slackened and I was able to draw my hand away.

When that happened I lost my fear, but I did not move or look away from her, because I felt very tired. I remember thinking, as I regarded her open eyes, 'So that is how people die: how short the distance is!' And I wondered, in a tired and anxious way, what I ought to do next; for I was then quite unfamiliar with the lineaments of death, and it did not seem to me an ordinary matter. I had expected that people would change more at the moment when they died. I had not realized that it would be so simple as this, just to stop breathing as she had done, with her flesh still faintly warm.

But a change did come very soon afterwards. The smile at the corner of her mouth collapsed, as if a stake which held it had been slipped away; and her mouth fell then into a different smile, which was gentler in shape. Her eyes seemed to answer to this new smile; they were like the eyes of a man awakening, exactly like the eyes of a shy, small child whom you have won by some kindness; they were softened and lit by a great surprise. That did not last for more than a few moments. But while it lasted her lips moved again. She said distinctly and in her ordinary voice, but very, very quietly, 'Bernie. Bernie, I didn't know! Bernie darl —'

After she had said that she kept quite still, and the surprise went

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away from her eyes as an oil lamp goes out when you turn down the wick. Imperceptibly, though it did not take very long, the frame of her last smile collapsed and left her face ugly, except for the cheeks and temples, which were always beautiful. What I saw now had nothing to do with Charlotte Quindle and I knew that she had gone.

I have no means of telling how long I went on sitting there, foolishly inert. I remember vividly the feeling of intense fatigue, and an anxiety which looks to me strange now about this image which had been Charlotte. I remember also a subtle sense of happiness, unrelated to the thoughts which blew gustily about my mind. It may have derived chiefly from the calm in which Orchilly had always wrapped me; but I think it came in part from the realization that so little had happened, and that a problem which had troubled me ever since my father's death at Verdun seemed, in this hour, so easy to comprehend. (You may understand that, or perhaps you cannot: the greater the reality of experience, the less will it be trimmed to the narrow shape of language.) Surely I did not hear anyone come into the room and go away again. But Kiss-Chick must have come, for when I roused myself I found that Aileen was beside me.

I never admired her more than at that time. I could see that she suffered hideously from weakness and nausea, but she kept a rider's hand upon herself, and on Kiss-Chick and me. Illness, I suppose, has no final powers upon a creature of that breed; certainly the features of death have not, for in the tract from Sidney Street to Burdett Road the shapes of birth and death are the scenery they have from childhood. 'I shall want warm water, Ivan,' she said, 'you had better fill the big kettle. You, Roger, you can find a clean towel in the airing cupboard. No, you'd better lie down for a bit — you'll find an Aspro on the chest-of-drawers in my room. Wait, Ivan! — you can take this tray down with you.' And already, without fear or fuss, she was closing Charlotte's eyes.

In truth I was not much help to her. My thoughts were fixed now on Bernard's return; and in that peculiar state of lassitude I could not see how to tell him what had happened. Mechanically

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I did get the towel she wanted, and brought the water up; while Kiss-Chick, who was weeping continuously, sought vainly for my advice. Should he finish cleaning Mrs. Quindle's shoes, he asked; somehow it seemed disrespectful to leave one pair unpolished. Would Dr. Quindle be pleased if he made some arum lilies out of paper to go on the bier? After this I saw him constantly with a struggling dog or cat in his arms, which he was taking to lock up in the bathroom; that, if I perfectly understood him, was a funeral custom in the village he came from.

It must have been about midnight when Bernard got back. The Kiss-Chicks had gone to bed. I heard Calpurnia's hooves and went into the kitchen to wait for him. He said, as he came in:

'Mackenzie's missed the train, he won't be here till eight-thirty to-morrow. She hasn't woken, has she?'

'She did wake,' I told him.

He went past me, taking off his coat. At that moment I was only a piece of furniture.

'Did you give her any of that stuff?' he asked over his shoulder.

I followed him through the dining-room and half-way up the stairs. I said: 'Bernard, it's no good.'

'No good?'

'She's gone,' I said.

He turned right round and looked past me down the stairs, as if he had heard some noise and didn't know what had made it. His mouth took shape to say something; but he changed his mind and went on slowly to Charlotte's room, went in and locked the door behind him.

When he came down again, perhaps half an hour afterwards, his face made me think of all the clichés: 'haggard,' 'a man completely changed,' 'seemed to grow old in one night': but his movements and his voice were calm. I had recovered my wits enough to do the obvious things, to get a fire going and set the table for his supper. He sat down rather mechanically, said a silent grace, and spread some butter on the bread I had cut for him.

He said, looking at the teapot, 'I suppose it was madness to go. I thought she was safe for another twenty-four hours at least. I

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can't think even now how it came so quickly. What time was it?"

'I think — about two hours ago,' I told him. 'Perhaps a little more.'

'And — there was a lot of pain?' he asked. 'I'd rather know.'

I said: 'I don't think it was very bad. It's hard to tell. She's not the kind — I mean, she didn't make any fuss.'

He nodded. 'No, she never made any fuss. Look here, have you had a meal? You must have something, have some of that pie or whatever it is. No, I can't tackle it myself. You say there wasn't much pain?'

I knew what he wanted me to tell him. It was not easy, for our race and generation hold emotion to be a kind of nakedness. But I said, 'She spoke of you at the very end. I believe she imagined you were there.'

'What was it?' he asked abruptly. 'What did she say?'

I told him then, with difficulty, the last words she had said; and though his face was clutched with pain when he heard it I thought he smiled very faintly; as one who, turning a corner, comes upon a scene which some painting has made familiar.

'But that wasn't all?' he asked presently.

He was looking at my eyes now, and I could not prevaricate.

'Before that she was confused,' I said; and I gave him by degrees most of what she had said to me, without trying to soften it. He nodded steadily, crumbling the piece of bread he had buttered. It was like a stage meal, I ate very little and he nothing at all.

Soon he went out to make his usual round of the beasts, and afterwards we did the final household jobs, getting the kitchen clear, making up the boiler fire. My fatigue seemed to have passed, it was he who moved slowly and with a kind of uncertainty. I noticed several times that he went back to a job he had done already. Once he said, 'I don't know whether to let Charlotte have an egg for her breakfast,' and then leant against the kitchen table, puzzled, as if he could not see why a particular sum would not come out.

I suggested that he should go to bed, and he said, 'Yes, that's the

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most sensible thing to do.' But he got no farther than the dining-room, where he started to look at books and things which lay about. He said, 'Of course most of this stuff belongs to Adelaide Desmain. There are one or two things we rescued from Battersea. And then there's the furniture in Charlotte's room, all that belongs to her. It'll be the devil to sort things out. The Kiss-Chicks ought to have anything Virginia doesn't want, there's hardly anything I want to take to China.' He stopped abruptly when he said that, and looked at me in a remote and troubled way. 'But you know, she won't let me go,' he said seriously. 'Even now she won't let me go.' He got out the old attaché case in which he kept his translation and sat down to work. I think he had forgotten altogether what time it was. But after a while he looked up, caught sight of me, and said, 'Roger, I'm sorry, I should have asked you — what about your room, are you fixed up?' I told him that I must leave soon, I had to be in camp by five. Hearing that, he wanted me to go to bed at once, and promised to wake me at three. As a compromise, I settled myself to sleep on the sofa. But I was wakeful now, and my eyes continued to follow him as he moved about the room.

'I must tell you,' I said, 'I've heard about Vaughan. I only wanted to tell you that I'm so terribly sorry.'

He seemed to ponder that, scraping his lips with his teeth, as if I had asked for his advice on a complicated problem.

'That's what I can't forgive myself,' he said. 'Of course I should have told her — I made up a cheap fib about the telegram. At my age, you know, it's pretty feeble, falling into the same old traps. I thought I'd spare her — I thought it might be too much for my darling to stand up to. And there was cowardice in it too; she might have said that I was to blame, and I couldn't face that. You can always find good reasons for lying, and they always turn out to be bad ones. No, I can't forgive myself that. I'd never deceived her before. She wasn't the sort of person you've got to hide things from, she never wanted to dodge the issues. I can't put it right now. And I can't put things right with Vaughan either. He thought I was angry with him because he had gone away from God. I can't put that right now.' He stirred the fire with his heel and put



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another log on. 'It's extraordinary, Ian Mackenzie missing that train. He's the sort of man who's never late for anything.'

When it was nearly time for me to go he said he would come with me as far as the main road. But I would not let him. If Aileen had a bad turn she might want his attention, I said. In truth, I doubted if he had strength just then to walk the mile or so it would mean, and I did not feel certain that he could find his way back. His movements were brisker now, as he went to and from the kitchen getting tea for me; but he kept talking, in a way that worried me, about a half-crown he owed to some farmer at Dubbledale.

I decided to come back, somehow, if only for an hour, in the course of the next evening.

This was an untidy sort of parting. When I was ready to start he was reading an old newspaper he had picked up in the kitchen, and he answered my leave-taking with only a casual 'Good night!' But before I was out of the yard he pursued and caught me.

'Roger,' he said, 'I won't try to thank you. Not just now. I hate making a mess of things — any more things, I mean.' He held my arm with both his hands; it was another moment of difficulty, and yet I was glad he had not let me go without that gesture. 'Listen,' he said, 'I want you to forget all this. No, you can't, of course you can't. But I don't want you to connect my egotism and cowardice with what I believe in, do you see: what I believe in isn't selfish or cowardly, it's only me that's that. You do see what I mean?'

I replied that I saw what he meant. I just heard him whisper, 'God bless you.' I answered, 'And you!' — I don't suppose he heard me, but that could not possibly have mattered. And I went on hurriedly down the lane.

The rain had cleared, leaving the stars brilliant. For a time I saw them smudged, for I found myself weeping.

My recollection of the walk back is indistinct. I mean, I cannot remember any stage in it, and I never knew afterwards which of several routes I had taken. What I do remember is the sensation of narcosis in which I walked. My head ached a little, and the muscles of my face were stiffened as if with cramp. Otherwise I did not feel my body at all, my legs required no more of me than if I

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had been on horseback, my boots seemed to make curiously little noise on the metallised road. This detachment from the body was matched by a severance from my emotions. The self that walked had been much troubled to-night; but the self who was I, released, could regard his trouble with a painless pity, feeling this liberty and the largeness of the starred sky.

I recovered my senses when a country of lights and noise gathered about me. There seemed to be a group of shapes where the main track of the camp cut over the road. An officer stood astride his motor-cycle, which coughed consumptively, and poured the light of a flash-lamp on to a millboard. He was shouting through a megaphone, 'Fourteen! Fifteen! Sixteen! — *Sixteen! — where in hell?*' Over in the football field I could see the parking lights of the three-tonners in line abreast. As each was called I saw a pair of lights creep forward, swing and disappear behind the armourer's tent; a voice in the darkness, 'Clear!'; and the monstrous beast growled up to us between the chestnuts, stood panting while its mahout was given his route-card, then retched, and grumbled on towards the Headquarters lines. Excited by this poetry of giant shapes broken to obedience, odour of warming engines in the cold air, thrust of harsh voices across the murmurous uproar, I dawdled for a time in the shadow of the guard-room. Then, threading a path through the scurry, I got to my bunk.

The hut was in a frenzy with people bundling their kits. A scrofulous sergeant, who cleaned his teeth every Christmas Eve, said, 'What, you decided to join the fuming war after all?' I sleepily asked: 'What war?' 'How in fuming hell should I know!' he said, 'but what we're in it this time, up to our bloody necks. We're fuming off at six.'

## I4

A FAGGOT of letters reached me in the Evelyn Baring Hospital at Khartoum. To judge by the rubber-stamping some of them had travelled far and deviously. I did not grumble over that. The marvel was that letters ever found you at all.

The girl said, out of her kindness, 'Now you just tell me which is the one from your best girl-friend, and I'll put it so as you can read it without the weeniest trouble.' I said: 'You'll leave the whole damned lot here, and not interfere, or I'll get up and wring your skinny neck, without the weeniest trouble.'

Two or three were addressed in Bernard's hand. I picked the one which had the Cernwith postmark.

'I shall write to you properly later on. No time for serious correspondence at present: I am plagued by attorneys. Charlotte had some debentures or whatever you call them. Latterly they yielded a little under £100 a year. This, under a marriage settlement or trust or what not, should have gone in equal parts to Wag and Ginnie, and Wag's "decease," as they call it, introduces the kind of complication which to the legal mind is ambrosia and hydromel. I was brought up to look on shillings with respect, and I have since found them a useful adjunct; but I simply cannot take the fantastic interest in money that these people do. I feel myself an egregious hindrance to their sport, like a teetotaller at a coming-of-age. I am also in correspondence with people at the Foreign Office. (Here it is I who expand, while the "distant subscriber," as the P.M.G. would say, is laconic.) And between times I sweat to finish my translation.

'My purpose, now, is merely to send you a copy of a letter I had from Vaughan. It was written only a few hours before he started the last trip. The original I have sent to Virginia; no one else is to see it. Read it or don't, just as you like. I don't want to thrust my privacies into your lap. Only it would make me rather happy to

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know that you had read it, because I think you may not have known Vaughan very well, and I should have liked you to know him as I did. To me the letter has given a peculiar happiness. For it certifies that he was the man I believed him to be, that he understood what I was always afraid to tell him, and that there was no high wall between us.

'Her mortal part is buried at Dubbledale. I know they will not fail, in Dubbledale, to give that care to the spot which her beauty asks for. It was all rather exhausting, particularly as my leg played me up. Chippetts of Windermere sent a triste and rather beery man to do the business, and he fussed appallingly, particularly because I wore my usual clothes. He practically ordered me to put on a suit of some sort, and generally to comport myself like a dyspeptic banker; all this with a congealing gravity of bilious tact which brought me near to frenzy. Of course one has no right to grumble. Death is the very life of undertakers, and it's churlish for a layman to resent their epicureanism. But I kept longing for Charlotte to take everything out of his hands with her sense and taste; I kept thinking, in a curious way, "Charlotte will be along in a moment, she'll know what to do, she'll put everything right." Marcus Dyrning took the service, very beautifully. The people were enormously kind, though I was too confused to know which of them were there. Ivan gave way to what seemed — to my English sense — a rather unbridled piety at the graveside. He was wearing a colossal top-hat borrowed from Curtewn, whose grandfather wore it as Town Crier of Keswick, and was carrying Shalce, horizontally and head-to-rear, under one arm (Aileen was still not well enough to come). The total effect was disturbing. When I got back I bolted myself in the Elsan and laughed without stopping for about twenty minutes. Then I reflected that it was exactly the sort of jest Charlotte would have enjoyed, and I became weak with loneliness.

'Enough for the present. So fearfully tired. You know how my thoughts follow you, with what a burden of gratitude and benediction. . . .'

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The copy of Vaughan's letter was smudgily typed on sheets torn from an exercise book.

'DEAR FATHER: This is a substitute for another letter which I have just torn up. One writes these letters — you know how it is. I'm out again to-night, and there's always the chance of this trip being the awkward one. I am thought to be a quite competent airman, but one's luck can't last for ever.

'An apology, first. I was damned rude when I last saw you. I was wretched about it for some time afterwards; then I remembered that you were not one to take things at their face value, that you, of all men in the world, are the first to see what is working the marionette's absurd and ugly gestures. Nevertheless, I do say that I am deeply sorry.

'There's no excuse. But you won't mind my giving you the whole explanation — a sort of *apologia pro vita sua*. I mean, it's not just that my "nerves" have been in an odd state. They have, as a matter of fact. It's extraordinary, I thought that being frightened was something one would get used to. At school I got so used to taking cold baths in the morning that I hardly noticed it. Fright is evidently different — with me, at least. The first time I ever left the ground I was sick with terror. And roughly speaking I feel the same whenever I leave it now. I loathe and dread flying as some people loathe and dread the sea.

'Of course you know that, though I've never told you. You are far too percipient not to know it. And yet you never tried to persuade me to give it up when I had a chance to do so. I believe I know why. It hurts me to think that when you get this you may be blaming yourself. I do beg you not to. Fundamentally, we know each other too well for that.

'No, it has not been just a case of nerves, but rather a case of philosophical shipwreck. The thing you and I always differed about is the question of God. That always seemed to me the one subject on which your mind lost its direction in a fog of poetic delusion — the hypothetical Creator, it seemed to me, had never shown the faintest interest in his own creation. This was the

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attitude of indifference, but I became more positive and more hostile when the present show started. You realize — of course you do — what it has meant to me. I believed in the value of my job, and in my own vocation to it, with something like an artist's fanaticism. I still think that no job ever conceived is quite so rich in its rewards as the desperately slow business of fitting tiny pieces into broken minds, disentangling and refashioning minds that are smashed or eaten with disease or congenitally twisted. You probably realize that the reason I didn't marry Eleanor was her total lack of sympathy with what I was doing. It was a stiff price, but I was prepared to pay it. Then, of course, the war came, and I found myself tied up in it like everyone else, through my own common-or-garden conceit. I was offered a military hospital job — I never told you. But that seemed to me neither one thing nor the other. The view I took was "Either I go on with the job I was made for, or else I jump into the killing business with all four feet." And to a creature of my personal vanity the first alternative was out. I went the whole hog. Dropping bombs seemed to me the nastiest kind of martial activity; and if I was to be in this game it seemed illogical to let other people do nastier jobs than mine. That was the way my mind worked. It seemed to me then that God or someone had played a fairly smelly trick on me. And my attitude was: "All right! If that's what you want you shall have it!"

'It has become rather different. Perhaps because of the people I've worked with, the quiet little men, the stolid South Africans, the Poles with their burnt-out eyes. But I do not think I am altogether deluded. A man who got away from Germany quite recently told me what they are teaching the children in a school where he was the physics-master. And I have been thinking ever since, though not always coherently, "It is better to accept all this, the destruction and the pain, than to accept that. There is, in the end, something called truth of which the value cannot be measured in other terms." I believe that that's how you see it too.

'Flying gives you a great deal of time to think. For long hours a part of your mind is just idling (while another part is occupied with the mechanics of the business, and a third is just repeating,

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"This is hell, this is just hell by instalments, very often one is still conscious when it strikes the ground and then one burns"). In those hours I try to get my thoughts into something like sequence. Not very successfully. But sometimes I feel that the key to the whole problem is only just evading me, like a name that's on the tip of one's tongue. We may be in a coma of delusion, but we are all agreed that suffering buys something worth the price. And surely no one but a fool would say that the agony we spread is intended for a mere inoculation, or insurance or amputation or what you will, against a recurrence of agony of the same kind. On the other side, of course, they know exactly what they are trying to buy, viz. the release of the tribal soul into a tribal immortality. Our object is not so simple as that, and it will not be defined in such simple terms. What we believe in, I suppose, is very nearly the opposite: we believe in the value of individuals, their human affections and their private virtues.

'But why? I keep using that word "value," as if it meant something transcendental and unalterable. Which is what it does mean to me. And why should my notion of value be any more intrinsically sound than that of the fellow we shot to hell on our last trip — as I believe it is? If it means anything at all, if the idea of value is not merely a figment of confusion, then it must derive from something outside ourselves and our dimension. Unless the faith we share is meaningless (I and Ball-Eye Watson, Ted Leach and Toronto Fynn) there is no other answer.

'You see: in a muddled way I've got somewhere near to the position that you have been in all your life. I have not been brought so far without resisting. I did not want to believe in a Supreme and Eternal, since I thought it would mean betraying the paramountcy of my own reason. (I know so much about the mechanism of the human mind. It always seemed irrational to doubt the adequacy of my own.) Perhaps I struggled partly because I wanted to assert myself against my dependence on you; I wanted my intelligence and virtues to be my own. However, that is done with. I know that truth is something holier than mere accuracy, I know that love is not mere appetite and that woods and clouds are beautiful. I

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believe in those values, and I cannot escape the author of them, I can't get away from the knowledge of God or the belief that he is good. You will say (not unkindly) that that doesn't take me far. It doesn't. But that is all I can say. In this I'm like a child, I've got to start at the beginning of the business now. And there may not be an awful lot of time. Well, I know that you pray for me, and I'd rather rely on your prayers than on my own. Meanwhile, perhaps what I'm doing, when it is understood, will be taken as some poor sort of sacrifice.

'You won't think me a poseur? I know you won't. Please, please don't imagine that I'm pretending for one moment to be a hero or a martyr. (I've always thought that martyrs were fundamentally exhibitionist. I suppose that was wrong too.) No, I want you, at least, to see me quite plainly, a bewildered and irresolute creature, shivering with fright. Yet not altogether an unhappy one, in these last few days. For no reason (since your letters have never varied in their kindness) I have had the feeling that we are closer. And against reason I look forward to our reunion. I do not think we have laughed together or smelt the spring together for the last time. I can't conceive of Heaven as a place for people of my kind — not even if there's a Third Class compartment, with hard seats and harps slightly out of tune. But I think they will let me be somewhere, because I was so pitifully confused, where I shall hear your voice and occasionally feel your hands. I shouldn't grumble then.

'You will know what to say to Mother. I have tried to write to her, but I can't manage it, somehow. Perhaps you could make out to her — only to her — that I have been heroic. I think this might help more than anything. And of course you will give her all my love.

'To yourself, something more than love. More than a son's gratitude. Call it my faith, in you and in what you hold. That's the best I've got for you. You (being what you are) will accept it, understanding.'

The rest of the letter had fallen on the floor. I had to wait till the pert girl came again, and then eat dust by the tablespoonful.



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There was another of Bernard's, dated from some Bed-and-Breakfast place in Alderney Street.

'This is not the letter I promised you, it's merely the effervescence of a jobbernowl quite tipsy with his luck. The other state of mind will return: the loss of people is not a thing you get over like measles. But on some days one's fortune is so splendid that the intoxication makes you forget all the other realities.

'By pure chance (though my view of "chance" is not the same as everybody's) I saw a paragraph tucked away in the *Manchester Guardian* which said that Clement Oatsell was forming an ambulance unit for China. I knew Oatsell in a dim way—he is a friend of Robert Pierhurst, and we sat on the platform together at some meeting in London. I wired to him for particulars and he wrote by return. His complement of doctors was already full, and in any case he wouldn't look at one over the age of forty. But I found out through Pierhurst that he was still short of three or four ambulance orderlies—fellows to scrub the operating table, that sort of thing—and might take someone on that ticket up to forty-five or a bit more, if thoroughly fit. So I borrowed some money from old Gillish (I thought I had some money in the post office, but it appears that somehow I haven't) and came to London like a homing antelope. Spent a whole morning chasing Oatsell from one of his committee rooms to another. Ran him to earth somewhere in the heights of Aldwych and had him lunching with me (at some appalling public-house I caught sight of) before he knew what was happening to him, poor chap. Then, having bought all the food there was in this pub and stuffed it into this fellow, I told him he was going to include me in his outfit. He was a good deal surprised—not a man who is very quick in absorbing new ideas. I admitted that I was very nearly fifty (my memory for detail is not as good as it was), but I pointed out (*a*) that I was as fit as any boy of twenty (you know, my rheumatism has given me no trouble to speak of for months past) and (*b*) that for any sort of ambulance work you are better off with a slightly older man who does know the difference between a pair of forceps and a stomach-pump than with an athletic

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greenhorn who as likely as not will empty the slops into the sterilizing tank. (Remember the fashionable surgeon who said, "Neatest amputation of my life this morning. Drunk, too. Pity it was the wrong leg"?) The upshot of all this is that he has promised (and I have it in writing, for I'm not such a fool as people say) to take me if — if — I can produce an absolutely copper-bottomed medical certificate.

'Well, that's easy. To-morrow morning I go to present my carcase to a man in Weymouth Street who is one of my oldest friends and quite the most incompetent doctor who ever qualified. I have the certificate typed out already. If by any chance he won't sign I shall hawk it up and down Wimpole Street until I find someone who will.

'We leave some time after the middle of next month. So I shall have time to clear things up at Orchilly, including my translation, which wants about 7,000 words. The chief thing is to get the Kiss-Chicks comfortably settled — no small problem. Then there are the bitches, and the other animals. At the moment I simply cannot see how to find homes for them all. But I shall work it somehow. I was feeling most desperately tired — I wanted to sit down after every small job, and when I did sit down it was a fight to get up again. But all that disappeared when this stroke of fortune came, I'm fit for anything now. This afternoon I sang, "There's a long, long trail a-winding," in the Strand Corner House, causing alarm and despondency.

'If only there were some way to share all this with Ginnie!

'I shall have to stop. I am writing this, by courtesy of the Management, in a sort of best-parlour place, and an aged *bonne* with bright yellow hair who wishes me in hell is laying the table all round me. The cruet is now on my blotting-paper, which I take to be a covert animadversion. Forgive all this! It must sound particularly senseless to you, living as perhaps you are where life itself is an hour-to-hour chance. But my beloved Ginnie is too *sérieuse* to take a share of this folly of mine, and Wag has gone. Perhaps, in spite of everything, you will be patient with me. Think what it is for me, after all these months of idleness and uselessness,

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to foresee myself in action again, back in my own country, having my days filled up with work that tightens on to mind and body; living with beloved people and being their servant, seeing re-lit in them the holiness of our inheritance.'

There were many more letters; bills and appeals, a final income-tax demand, an invitation to join a golf club near Torquay; but I didn't read anything more that day, for I was extremely tired and my eyes were working clumsily. When two or three days had passed I looked through the envelopes again, and came upon one with a Lincolnshire postmark, addressed in what I should describe as a swashbuckling hand. The heading of the letter — Chevestit Court — was embossed in a gothic fount of singular banality. I read:

'I don't know if you will have heard by now of Father's death — probably you only get papers when they're months old — if at all. There was a notice in *The Times* — in a phrase of Father's own "a brief but encouraging obituary" — written I imagine by a man called Van Elster. And afterwards there were some "appreciations" including one from Vergil Daubiney of Yale who once worked with him in Kansu and a very nice one from the Chinese Ambassador. And of course I have had a mass of letters and am still getting them.

'It happened without any illness at all — though he had said in one of his letters to me that he was fearfully tired. He was planning to go out to China with an ambulance, as some sort of bottle-washer. It was a mad scheme for a man of his age, but he always did mad things — did he ever tell you about his breaking into a Japanese prison camp and getting four men out? — and generally got away with it. The man who was running this unit tried to put Father off by saying he must have a medical certificate — which he knew Father couldn't get. Father, of course, knew differently — he went straight off to an old friend of his, a doctor in Weymouth Street whom we've always known as "Uncle Job," and tried to blackguard him into signing one. He — Uncle Job — sent me a letter all about it. Apparently Father was very quiet but absolutely

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madly determined, he said, "I must have that certificate and I'm going to fight for it — if you don't sign it I shall simply make myself a nuisance to every single doctor in the Register till someone does, so you might just as well sign." So just to keep Father quiet Job said he would test his heart. Father said, "*You test my heart* — you palpitating old fuss-pot! — I tell you you won't find one heart as sound as mine in any fifty of the miserable neurasthenics who make up your practice" (which in one way I think was true). And when he'd said that he started to blow down the U-tube, or whatever it is they use to test people's hearts, and his heart simply conked out. You know — it may sound odd — but I can't help thinking that Father would have said that was "rather amusing." At any rate, if he had to die I'm glad that was the way he died, laughing and fighting.

'He had bequeathed his body to the London School of Anatomy — so I was saved all the business of a funeral — which I always think are so primitive and vulgar.

'You will want to know about the Kiss-Chicks. I have got them here in one of the lodges, and I see them every day. Aileen helps a good deal on the home farm, and I think she would be happy if Ivan was happy. But he isn't — he keeps talking about the little restaurant he will start and all the money he will make — he can't realize what the food difficulty is or that Aileen would have to do all the work — in any case a return to town life would be almost bound to kill him. Poor little Shalce is still wearing the ghastly black suit which Ivan got him for Mother's funeral — Aileen thinks Ivan wouldn't like him to wear anything else till it's quite worn out. I value Aileen more than I can say — she is the one friend I can talk to about things I want to talk about. She sends you her love — or that is what she means, though she said "regards" being old-fashioned.

'I think you would also like to know that I had a letter from Vaughan's C.O. — somehow it didn't seem to me exactly the same letter that a C.O. always writes. He said, "Your brother was quite different from any other officer in the Station, and in some ways we were all a little frightened of him. But this is true (and I hope you

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will believe it): there was not one man in the Station who would not have given anything in the world to fly with him. He was the most brilliant pilot I have known, and he was one of those men, common in fiction but very rare in life, who do not know the meaning of fear."

'I suppose it's really rather *gauche*, my sending you all this about my family. Such a commonplace family, if you look at it as a stranger would — ridiculously English. But you see I've had a fairly large issue — your word — of loneliness to cope with all at once, and I've got to chatter to somebody — and even Aileen can't take in all of it. I'd like to write more about you and your doings — but how can I when I don't even know where you are? And I don't think you'd like me to say sympathetic-sounding things. Does it matter if I say that I think about you very often?

'It is a great thing for me — this is despicable and I shouldn't say it, but there you are — that E. is so utterly helpless. It means that he wants some kind of attention from the moment he gets up till the moment he goes to bed again — and though I'm getting more skilful it is still quite difficult to do — especially anticipating what he will want next and planning things so that he will always have something to hold his attention and prevent him concentrating on his helplessness. This at any rate takes up a great part of my mind — which would otherwise be thinking about my job in London and things like that. And also, of course, one feels that one's doing something which has simply got to be done, and that makes a great deal of difference. I know it's selfish — and Father would despise me for it — except that he knew people too well to despise them for anything.

'Adelaide has offered to give me Orchilly. I have said Yes, but I shan't go there again. Would you like it? I'll give it you if you would — otherwise I'll dump it on some charity. As far as I'm concerned the *genius loci* — is that the word? — has gone. If circumstances are ever different in years to come I think I may go to China — one has a sense of something being missing all the time, and I've got the idea that I might find it there.

'You will write again? — just a postcard to say you're all right.

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And when you're back in England — no, on second thoughts I can't very well get away to meet anyone, and it makes E. self-conscious to have strangers here. But will you — when you're back and correspondence isn't so remote and chancey — will you just let me know whether you mind my writing occasionally, about Father and Orchilly and so on? I should try not to be a typical female bore. And if you will tell me a little about yourself I shall be so enormously grateful — it would give me a kind of vicarious share in the war (I mean the real blood-and-beastliness war) which is denied to females. I expect you know that Father always prayed for you. If I was fit to take that over I would. Somehow it does give me a lot of pleasure — in my present existence — to think that you knew Father so well.

'Like Aileen, I send you my "regards."' '

I was not conveniently placed to answer that immediately; and my chance of returning eventually to England was then (I judged from the coy solemnity of those who moved about me) no answer to the punter's prayer. When I did come to reply, some time afterwards, I declined her offer of Orchilly; adding that I should visit her in Lincolnshire, and that her husband would have to put up with it.

She was right about Orchilly, I supposed.. By now the inside of the place would smell a little different even if the furniture had not been completely altered. The animals would not be there, nor would the embroidery of voices to which one had become accustomed. Bernard himself could have re-created it, there or in the Antipodes, but that was impossible now; if you lose a friend who has often played you music it is no good buying his old piano and expecting that the same tunes will come. It was sensible of Virginia to realize that. But I did not believe that this was the end of the matter.

From where I lay I could see across two more beds to the tall window. The window gave on to a balcony and a little court, drowned in angry sunlight, with a few shabby palms in it and a white wall on the farther side. Somebody over there seemed to be

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labouring upon the Moonlight Sonata almost all day long. In the ward itself there was bustle most of the day, as there is in all such places: the dressing-trays being wheeled about, a twitter of nurses' shoes, the continuous prayers and blasphemy of an Australian with his stomach full of shrapnel. But at some time in the afternoon it was generally still. I did not sleep then, as we were meant to do, for I was never sufficiently comfortable. I lay with my eyes open, staring at the draggled palms and the shadows on the white wall, listening to the *cliquetis* of the electric punkahs and the dawdled notes of the Moonlight Sonata. In those moments, which were like one moment going on and on, I could see the shape of Orchilly with peculiar clearness: firelight on the worn furniture and the dogs sprawling; a morning wind at my bedroom window, the very tricks and tones of Bernard's voice, the day's tiredness dissolved into the tune of the evening. So fresh were those scenes, passing in procession across the white wall and the pain in my side and the ragged music, that they possessed me with their happiness; and in the later hours, when the ward was astir again and the nurses' industry upon my bandages gave me great discomfort, the happiness remained like a crock of water beside me from which I could sip whenever I grew thirsty.

A physiologist will tell you, if you encourage him, why a man's judgement becomes uncertain when his body is under repair: the mechanics of cells and corpuscles are known like those of an artillery piece. But I am not satisfied that truth is finally held captive within that blue-print. The mind of a sick man may work at very low power; but when he has not to think of getting food or money, or of what will happen next (since nothing is going to happen), the little light which his mind can conjure will sometimes illumine a small area with peculiar intensity. My body is in its normal stride now, I am full awake, I have just telephoned to a friend and paid a laundry bill. Yet when I shut my eyes to return to the courtyard and the white wall, when I scan those former thoughts as you run through old letters of your own, I do not find them merely the inchoate substance of delirium.

Our happiness, I thought, had belonged in part to the place and

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the inflexions of its quietness; to the permanence you felt there, like the permanence of the house you grow up in; to its gentleness and ardour, its liberty and the days' compulsion, the stress of rooms to be swept and beasts to be foddered. That frame of small sensations could have yielded a mere pleasantness; an undersized and rather shy creature had turned the nugatory charm into the full wine of contentment. Yet I did not think he had intended so. He had wished very well to anyone who came there, he had given him such comfort as the place could afford. But he was no *hôte* of the self-conscious kind, he had never meant that his friends should praise his hospitality to him or among themselves. I doubted whether he had been aware of the special happiness which his hospitality gave us; in the main he thought it natural to be happy.

He was happy himself: had you known him as I did you would never have doubted that. He was worried by the small annoyances of every house, he was deeply troubled by his own failures and by the cosmic failure which the newspaper brought us in segments every day. And yet, with open and searching eyes, he was profoundly happy. The spring of his contentment had been far beyond our view; but its head was always visible, and we had caught a little of it within ourselves.

So it was possible, I thought, with the punkah monotonously clicking, the shadows of the thirsty trees advancing across the white wall, for a man to be happy; without a great deal of the apparatus you expect to need, without the cushioning of a partner's tenderness. The plasm of that beatitude seemed to be gentle, like Orchilly's colouring and sounds; you would hardly find it among the apocalyptic cries of hucksters in Harper's Bazaar. And yet it was nothing languorous or fragile; it must labour, I thought, as the heart incessantly labours, it must stand to the times' roughness with its own hard fibre and its intrinsic daring.

The *genius loci* she had called it. So far I could describe it, but I could not fasten it down. Perhaps the secret he had possessed was so much a part of him that it was useless to hunt for it. But he was in no sense a peculiar man. I was only certain that at Orchilly



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I had found things fitting together, as the elements of great pictures do; that the peace and splendour of that experience would remain with me, secure below the tides of discontent, till all experience was over.

There was still another of Bernard's letters, it had been hidden away between a postcard from Harry Borden and a bookie's circular.

“... one of those nights when I can't sleep. I was reading in an American paper, just before I went to bed, about the children in Greece. It left me in such misery that I could as easily rest on a bed of hot cinders. How intimately I feel with Wag, how precisely I see what he meant when he talked about the Creator taking no more interest in his creation. You know, the case against the Creator is pretty mountainous, and pretty watertight. I see no answer to it which is not contemptible. Unless — unless you accept (as it happens I do, with every voice that cries within me) the inconceivable truth that when the muddle had got beyond all hope he put himself in the very middle of it; not as a Jupiter in masquerade but as a creature of authentic flesh and blood, with their authentic passions and weakness: that he was sensitive enough to cry over a building, to feel somebody else's pain when she wasn't even in view: that he was a proletarian, a rebel and a failure, who was executed with all the contempt and obscene brutality that people had invented up till then: that in the last extremity of suffering he loved his friends and his torturers with so intense a passion that his spirit shattered the very axioms of physical creation. If that happened this Creator is neither aloof nor contemptuous. If it did not happen I cannot see why the flowers delight us still or why we who are intelligent should bother with such transitory things as kindness.

“That, at this moment, does not help the Greeks. Or the Chinese either. Only it proves — to me at least — that the larger battle is still worth waging, that we are something less futile than carpenters mending the deck of a sinking ship.

“That thing of Watts's that you still see in public-houses — “Hope,” he called it — depresses me more than anything the

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dadaists ever thought of. The poor girl looks as if she'd been reading the humorous weeklies for hours at a stretch. And why, I've always wondered, did she have to be parked on a cheese. . . .'

The young woman who managed me said I had done enough reading for to-day. They were all in a fuss shifting the beds and things. The Australian corporal had died, some hours earlier than they had arranged for it; his documentation had not been completed, and his bed was not one of the beds that people were supposed to die in. In the pillow's shelter I wept for a little; from tiredness, perhaps; not, I believe, from grief at that time. Outside, the sunlight fell in monotonous brilliance. The unknown pianist was getting down to the Moonlight Sonata, making the same mistakes all over again.

LONDON,

1943-44







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